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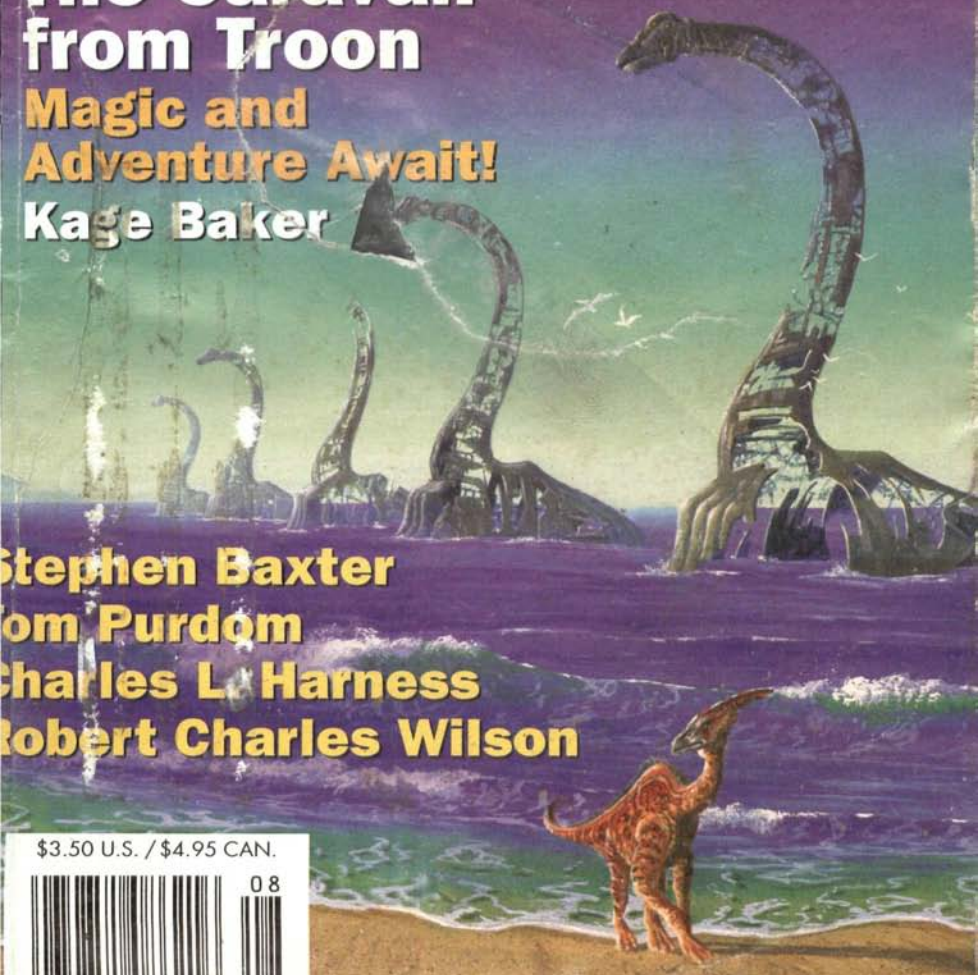

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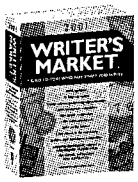

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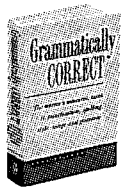

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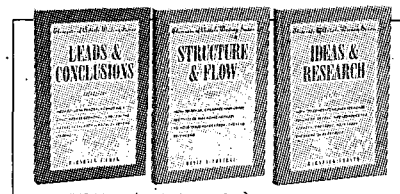

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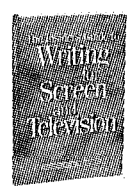

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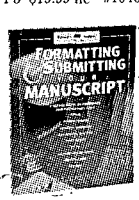

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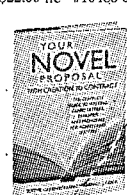

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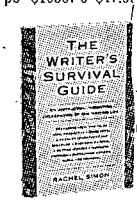

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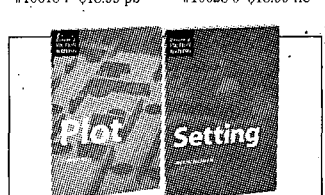

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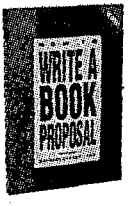

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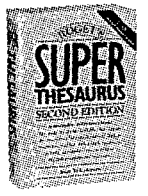

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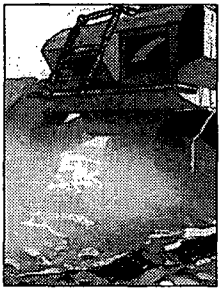

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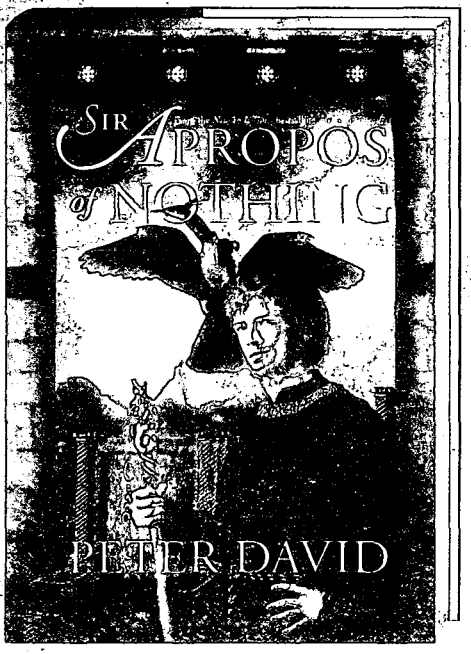

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

THE RADISH OF ALL EVIL

What I do, primarily, is work with words. I build things out of them. I built a castle out of them once, a vast and playfully conceived place that had some forty-thousand rooms, and then I built a whole world to contain it, in six fat volumes and one skinny one. Much earlier, I built the Great Wall of China out of words, too—that was a book I wrote in 1966—and so on and so on, a mountain of words that I've constructed with my very own two hands over the past five decades.

But I like to play with them as well as work with them. I had the good luck to have an old-fashioned classical education that included four years of Latin, beginning when I was twelve years old. Since Latin provides at least half the structural basis for the English language (the other half being the Anglo-Saxon that was spoken in England before the Norman conquerors arrived, bringing with them their Latin-based French) my knowledge of that language, rusty though it has become with the decades, allows me access to the roots of the words we use.

The *roots,* I said. The Latin word for "root" is *radix,* as in that good old proverb about *pecunia* being the *radix* of all *malorum.* (*Pecunia,* which means "money" in Latin, started out by meaning "cows," but that's a story I'll save to talk about some other time. Let's stick to roots for the moment.)

Radix—meaning root—sounds not unlike "radish," and for a very good reason, since a radish is an edible root and *radix* was what the Romans called that particular root. (*Radices,* in the plural.) But radishes, of course, are not the only edible roots—carrots, turnips, beets, and potatoes come quickly to mind, among many others—and technically the Romans would have classed all of those as *radices* also, but not as radishes. (Each had its own name. A carrot was a *pastinaca.* A turnip was a *rapum.* A beet was a *beta.* But they were all root-vegetables, and therefore could be called *radices* in a general way, though not in a specific one. Are you still with me?)

That Latin word *radix* has a larger, non-vegetable sense of "root" also. It meant the source or origin of anything. The base of a mountain was its *radix* in Latin. So was the base of the tongue. And so too were the bases on which mathematical structures are built: those square roots that you wrestled with in high-school algebra were square *radices* to Roman mathematicians. Which leads us to the mathematical term "radical," a quantity expressed as the root of another quantity. "Radical" also turns up in chemistry with a variety of meanings: a fundamental constituent of a chemical compound, for example. And then there is "radical" surgery, which is intended to remove the *root* of the disease.

These various scientific uses of "radical" all refer, essentially, to going to the core of a subject, its fundamental nature, its base. The political use of the word has the same origin: a political radical is one who, after taking a deep look at a social problem, proposes a profound change in

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the institutions that are responsible for it, that is, reaching down to their very roots to bring about change. (By which we see that the etymological gulf separating Karl Marx from a radish is not very great.)

And so this humble word, originally referring to the underground part of a plant and also to one kind of particular edible root, ramifies in many directions—and the harder we look, the more ramifications we find. "Eradicate," for example—a word that can mean getting rid of termites in your basement, or of stains on your shirt, or unwanted ethnic groups in your corner of the Balkans—can now be seen to have a root at its root: to "eradicate" is to pull something up by its *radix*. And, since *radix* turned into *racine* in medieval French, we have the French verb *deraciner*, to uproot, which leads us to our word "deracinated," the state of being cut off from one's cultural roots.

Does that mean that our word "race," meaning a family, a tribe, a people, and half a dozen other similar things, has its roots in *radix* too? My guess is that it does, although the professional etymologists are more cautious, tracing it back only to the medieval French *race* and the medieval Italian *razza*, both meaning "a group connected by common descent," but they hesitate to take the leap back to *radix* from there. Here in my Latin dictionary, though, is the phrase *radicibus natum*, literally "born of the roots," and meaning "a native of the same place." Those who are of the same race spring from the same roots, do they not? I think there's a connection here.

Ultimately, all the words we European-descended folk use are rooted—there it is again!—in the original Indo-European language, which was spoken in prehistoric times across much of the region stretching from India to Iceland. Since the eighteenth century those who study the history of language have recognized that peoples living in regions greatly distant from one another use similar words for certain basic concepts: for example, the word for "night" is *nox* in Latin, *nacht* in German, *noc* in Czech, *nux* in Greek, *notte* in Italian, and *nakt* in Sanskrit. "Mother" is *mam* in Welsh, *madre* in Spanish, *moder* in Swedish, *madar* in Persian, *matka* in Polish. A nose is *nez* in French, *nosis* in Lithuanian, *nos* in Russian, *nas* in Sanskrit.

The only plausible conclusion is that most of the languages spoken in Europe and Western Asia, however different they are in most respects (and German is very different from French, Czech very different from Persian!), must have had a common ancestor at some time in prehistory—a language spoken, perhaps, by a dynamic migratory race that set out from eastern Europe or western Asia around 3000 B.C. and spread in all directions, one branch going into Greece, another into Italy, some crossing Iran and Afghanistan into India, some going west to the British Isles and Scandinavia. Wherever they went, it seems, they brought their language with them, and managed to impose some form

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of it on the peoples among whom they settled.

Intensive study of the common roots of the terms that are similar in the various Indo-European languages has given us some idea of what that ancestral tongue must have been like. For example, it's easy to see that the word for "mother" must have begun with a sound like *ma-*, the word for "father" with *pa-*, the word for "nose" with an *n*-sound.

And when we look behind the Latin *radix* we can see peeking out the Indo-European root *ra-*, meaning "to grow out of" or "to derive from." It neatly connects the Latin *radix*, "root," with *ramus*, "branch"—and from *ramus* comes our word "ramify," to branch out, which I used just a few paragraphs back in describing how the primary meaning of a word can spread in many ways. We can see "radius" lurking there, and "radiate," and even—by way of the Latin word *ratus*, the past participle of a verb meaning "to count" or "to reckon," therefore "to think"—such words as "ratio," "ration," "rational," "ratify," and "reason."

I find this kind of word-play fun for its own sake. But it's also useful to me as a writer, and should be to you as a reader, because it reminds one that words aren't simply noises to which arbitrary meanings have been assigned, but that they have *inherent* meanings that carry over from language to language. (If you go back far enough, I suppose, the meanings do become arbitrary assignments: there's no inherent reason why a "ma-" sound should refer to a mother and a "pa-" sound to a father and a "ra-" sound to a root, but that's what was agreed on in prehistoric times, perhaps even in Cro-Magnon times, and that's what has come down to us today.) To understand that "radical," "radish," "eradicate," and "deracinate" all hearken back to an ancient word

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meaning "root" is to be able to perceive the interrelatedness of all those seemingly disparate concepts—that is, to be able to make conceptual connections, and thus to be able to think better. Which I am old-fashioned enough to believe is a desirable thing.

Much of the information I have shared with you this month, by the way, comes from Eric Partridge's brilliant book *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English,* which I have owned and used with pleasure for some forty years. This massive tome of nearly a thousand pages, which Partridge wrote unaided, provides us with the meaning and history and connectedness of more than twelve thousand common English words, and without much coaxing I will dip back into it in some future column.

Partridge, a New Zealander educated at Oxford, was plainly a man intoxicated with words. (And he points out that although "intoxicated" now means to be drunk, it has as its root "toxic"—poisonous—and "toxic" itself goes back to a Greek word for arrow-poison, derived from the Scythian root *taksha-,* a bow, and beyond that perhaps even to the Sumerian *tukul,* a weapon. Among his other books is one called *Shakespeare's Bawdy,* a startling exegesis of all the dirty words in the great bard's works, and another, the thirteen-hundred-page *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English,* that I go to whenever I need to understand some ancient colloquialism. ("Quiddle: 1) custard, or any sauce for pudding. 2) To spit.") But it is his *Origins* that I go back to most frequently, again and again.

And isn't it pleasant to think that if the English language had taken a somewhat different evolutionary course, Eric Partridge's famous etymological dictionary might have been called not *Origins* but *Radishes?* ○

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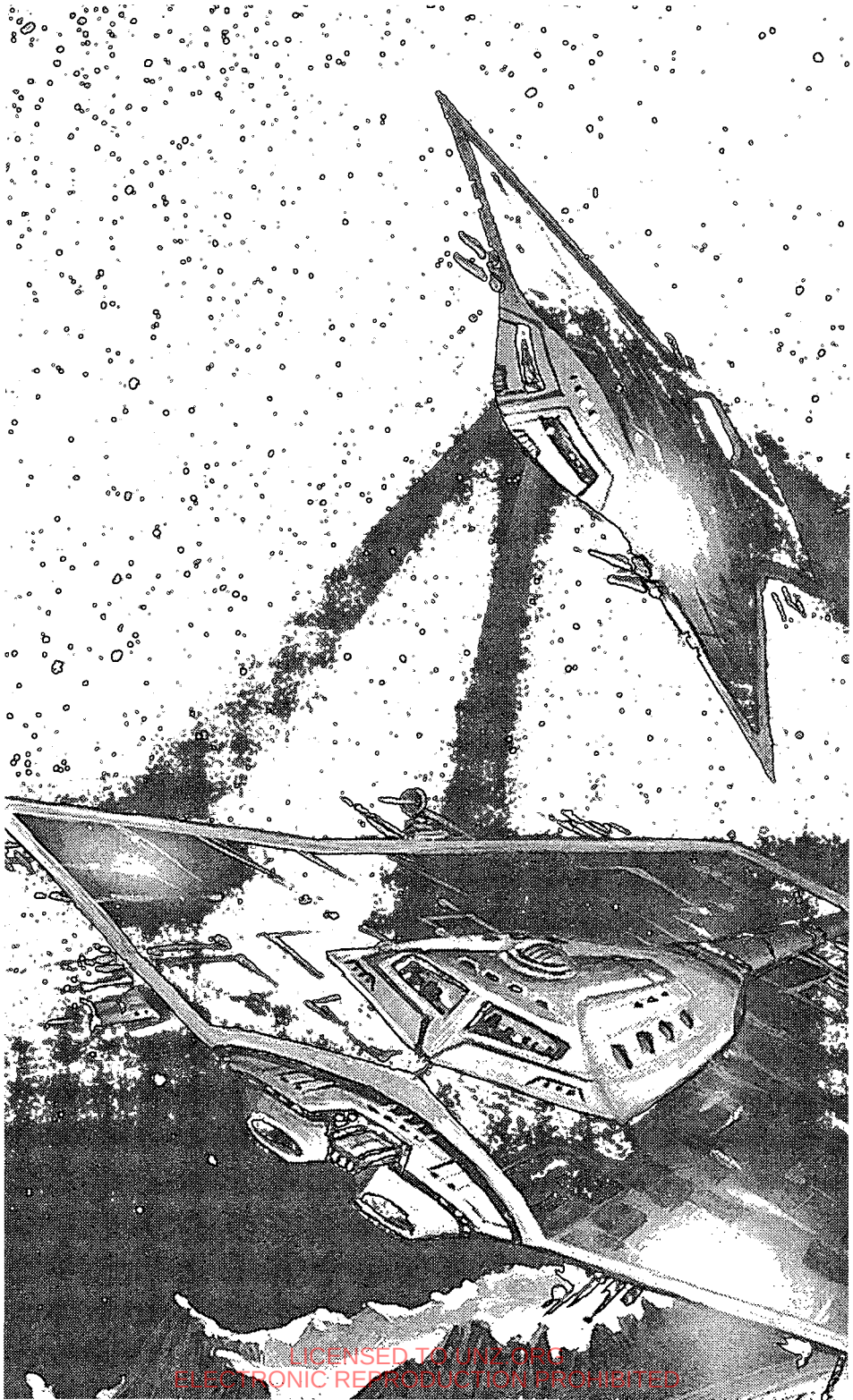

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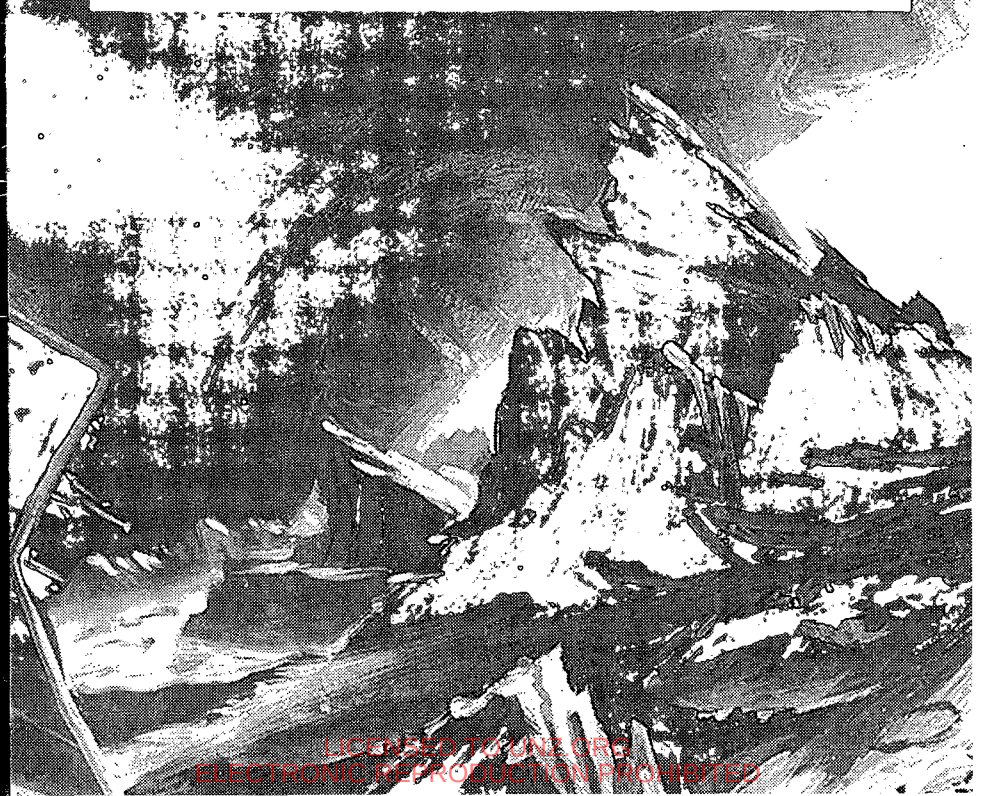
CIVILIANS

Tom Purdom

Illustration by Alan Gutierrez

Tom Purdom is currently writing about music for CitySearch on the web and working on more short stories. A number of his *Asimov's* stories are available in such anthologies as *Space Soldiers*, *Year's Best SF 2* and *5*, and *Asimov's Utopias* and *Valentines*. His Hugo nominee "Fossil Games" will be part of a forthcoming *Supermen* anthology. Mr. Purdom tells us, "I've now reached the age at which I can ride free on public transportation in Philadelphia. But I'm still walking most places and I'm still writing and reading and learning. And I'm still amazed when I get emails from people who like my stuff."



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"It looks like somebody may be following us," Lieutenant Kim said.

Daj had been monitoring the news media ever since the catapult had shoved the transport vehicle away from Huanying City. So far there had been no word about his mother or any of the troops under her command. Most of the stuff he had scanned on his notescreen had been general commentaries about the situation in the city. The real-time reports consisted of videos that emphasized angry faces, homicidal rhetoric, laments over the folly of mankind, and occasional images of people operating various kinds of projectile weapons.

It was a typical news media response to a violent event. There was a general agreement that the situation in Huanying was rapidly developing into a full-scale civil war. Beyond that, the news merchants were pandering to the public interest by maintaining a continuous flow of commentary and covering up the fact that they didn't have any solid information. Daj was only thirteen but he recognized the pattern.

He touched the controls on the right side of his notescreen and picked up a feed from the cameras mounted outside the transport vehicle. An arrow designated a dot near the upper left hand corner.

The other passengers in the vehicle all seemed to shift positions at the same time. The only exception was the girl huddled in the couch across the aisle. Wanshu was only seven. For her, adults were still background figures who spent much of their time engaging in random, uninteresting actions.

Lieutenant Kim occupied a couch in the front of the vehicle. A half-height partition separated him from his passengers. They could glimpse segments of his screens but they couldn't collect any meaningful information. They could hear him speaking into his headset but he was talking in a low murmur. For most of them his words would have been meaningless even if he had been bellowing. Kim was speaking Ghurkali—the working language of the Fourth International Brigade—and his passengers were all civilians.

Daj spoke Ghurkali. So did his civilian father, Yin Hong. Most people spoke two of the official international languages. Daj spoke three—Techno-Mandarin, Hindi, and English. Someday he would speak all six. Right now he was concentrating on other types of learning.

Lieutenant Kim turned on the intercom loudspeakers and spoke to his passengers in Techno-Mandarin. "I'm sorry to report we are being fired on. Our armor system is containing the attack, but I've talked with Battalion and they agree we should make some attempt to evade, instead of staying on course and waiting until we're supposed to make our scheduled orbital transfer maneuver. I'm putting us in an orbit that will bring us very close to the surface of the planet—close enough that I can try to interpose some mountains or craters between us and their radar. We believe there's a good possibility the two vehicles can occupy significantly different orbits when we come back up again."

Daj frowned. Kim's statement made no sense. The standard military projectile was a two-gram package that contained several hundred molecular devices. The moles started multiplying and destroying as soon as the package hit its target. The armor system consisted of moles that responded by attacking the intruders and repairing the damage. If the armor system was "containing" the attack, why were they attempting a fuel-consuming—and peculiar—evasion maneuver?

"The thrusters will operate for about one minute," Kim said. "You'll feel a slight push against your couch harnesses."

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Daj manipulated the controls on his notescreen and zoomed in on the other vehicle. The best magnification on his system brought it to a simulated two kilometers. He couldn't make out any details, but it looked to him like it was a standard orbit-to-orbit civilian transport vehicle. There were no turrets or any other indication it was armed. The two turrets on their own vehicle should have had it outgunned. Their armor system should have neutralized any moles the other vehicle could launch.

The thrusters were pushing him against his couch harness, as promised. The thrust ended after sixty-eight seconds and his stomach advised him he had returned to a free-fall, zero-g environment. He put his phone against his mouth and murmured to his civilian father in Ghurkali.

"It looks like the trade in illegal fabricator programs has once again created problems," Daj said.

"I see you've been thinking again," Yin Hong replied.

"Am I right? We wouldn't be diving on Mercury if our armor was working as well as he says it should."

"Perhaps he just wants to show us what a superb pilot he is."

Father Hong was strapped into the couch directly behind his son. Daj couldn't see his father's face but he could visualize the expression it had probably assumed. Yin Hong was a prominent sociologist, with students and research partners scattered all over the solar system. Daj had been hearing that wry, sardonic tone since he was a year old.

"I suspect we shouldn't discuss this any longer," Father Hong said. "Not even in Ghurkali."

"I just wanted to get your opinion, Doctor."

"Well, you have it, young man."

"Do you truly think we can evade them by going down to Mercury?"

"I'm afraid that's outside my area of competence."

Daj kept his notescreen connected to the external cameras and watched Mercury expand. Every few minutes he switched to another camera and noted that the other vehicle was maintaining its distance.

In Daj's opinion, Lieutenant Kim's biggest problem would be the three giant interlocking habitats that circled Mercury. Each habitat was over three kilometers high and twenty kilometers wide. Each one went all the way around the planet, creating a sealed environment that was so large it generated a self-adjusting weather cycle. Shorter lengths of habitat connected the larger units and linked them into a single environment. For a vehicle attempting a low level orbit, the habitats were planet-circling walls. If Lieutenant Kim slipped up and crashed into one of those walls, he would trigger a historic catastrophe.

Their vehicle had been orbiting Mercury at a little over half a kilometer per second when it started its fall. They were moving over two kilometers per second faster when they started their low-level race across the surface. For Daj, it was the first time he had truly experienced speed. He had ridden in ships that traveled at several times his current speed, relative to the rest of the solar system, but he had never watched a planetary landscape stream past a hurtling vehicle. The craters and hills on his notescreen were solid objects, not simulations, and he was watching them in real time, from the inside of a vehicle that would smash into said objects at two-and-a-half kilometers per second if Lieutenant Kim and his piloting system made a mistake. Lieutenant Kim was also providing some tactile reminders that the

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images on Daj's notescreen were reaching him in real time. Sideward blasts from the thrusters shoved Daj across his couch. Upward blasts lifted the vehicle over obstacles and pushed his stomach toward the floor.

The couch directly behind Wanshu was occupied by a slender, stylishly dressed woman named Ankala Midora. She was still wearing the jeweled, hexagonal hat she had been sporting when she pulled herself through the door of the transportation vehicle. Wan let out a yelp the first time the thrusters pushed her sideways, and Ms. Ankala leaned forward when the acceleration stopped. She stretched her arm around the edge of Wan's couch and touched the girl on the shoulder.

"Lieutenant Kim is making some unusual maneuvers. It's all right. We're just going to be tossed around a little. It's nothing to worry about."

Daj could smell Ms. Ankala's perfume. There had been a number of times in the last few tendays when he had spent long intervals visualizing the way her lithe, snaky body would move in his arms. Ms. Ankala had struck up a relationship with Combat Sergeant Jo about five tendays ago. She and Sergeant Jo always seemed to have some part of their bodies in contact when they were together.

Lieutenant Kim fired the rear thrusters for a full minute as they completed their swing around the planet—a maneuver that was obviously supposed to place them in an eccentric orbit, with the high point far above their original altitude. Daj scanned through the external cameras and stopped when he found something that looked like it could be the other transport vehicle. It was about fifteen kilometers away. It seemed to be moving at approximately the same speed as their own vehicle.

He turned on his phone. "Esteemed Doctor."

"I've seen it," Father Hong said.

"We expended a notable percentage of our maneuvering fuel in that last acceleration."

"I noticed."

"Of course it's always possible our pursuers could have expended most of their fuel trying to stay with us. . . ."

"I think it would be best if we awaited the next development in silence."

Daj returned his notescreen to the news monitor. A bald, heavily bearded expert on "communal dissolution situations" was discussing—for the third time in half an hour—the political situation in Huanying City.

"A conflict between the original investors and the renter class they have attracted is not, of course, an uncommon development in orbiting cities. Usually, it's settled relatively painlessly, with the renters acquiring some kind of formal participation in the city's political structure. In this case, the situation has apparently been aggravated by the unusual virulence of a feud between two of the leading families in the original investor faction. The leading renter organization, the Heavenly Union Society, seems to have become a much more volatile organization when its leadership fell into the hands of an apostate from one of the most powerful families in the city's ruling elite."

A text bar appeared under the expert's chin. Daj touched a control and the screen scrolled a paragraph at his standard reading speed.

The Heavenly Union Society has released the following message to "all legitimate news sources": An orbiting space vehicle crewed by members of the Society is now pursuing a transport vehicle belonging to the Fourth International Brigade. The passengers on the Brigade vehicle belong to the families

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of the force recently stationed in Huanying City. The crew of the Heavenly Union vehicle reports that it has fired on the Brigade vehicle and overwhelmed its defensive system. The pilot of the Brigade vehicle was ordered to accept a boarding party and transmitted a refusal. The commander of the Heavenly Union vehicle has responded by ordering the pilot to place his passengers in emergency pressure suits and move them to the outside of the vehicle, so they may be transferred to the safety of the Heavenly Union vehicle.

"Our situation appears to be more difficult than we've understood it to be," the man sitting in front of Daj said. "If you haven't been scanning the news media, I suggest you do so at once."

Ms. Ankala looked up from her notescreen. She had obviously been using it for other purposes.

The man who had spoken up was the husband of a communications sergeant. His name was Torisoti Denashi—*Mr.* Torisoti to properly reared thirteen-year-old sons—and Daj had learned he was involved in an unusual marital arrangement: a two-husband triple. Mr. Torisoti had accompanied his wife to Mercury orbit while the other husband had stayed home.

Eighty-five percent of the triples recorded in the databanks were one-husband, two-wife arrangements. Daj had hoped he could correlate the aberration with some observable quality in Mr. Torisoti's personality. Unfortunately, Daj was the son of a Combat Major. His parents had their off-duty life and Mr. Torisoti and his wife had theirs.

"Our lives are in danger, Lieutenant," Mr. Torisoti said. "Don't you think even we lowly civilians have some right to know that?"

Lieutenant Kim turned his couch around. He stared at his passengers through the display visor that covered most of his face.

"I've been receiving orders from Battalion since I first realized we were being followed," Kim said. "They feel there is no serious danger. Our solar collectors have been heavily damaged but we still have about 20 percent of our solar power flow. And we have fully charged batteries in reserve. Our defense system has rallied after the initial onslaught. Right now it's holding on to that remaining 20 percent. We believe our fabricators can supply us with oxygen and everything else we need for another seventy-two hours. I can also tell you your family members in Major Yin's party are all safe. Battalion's main worry at this moment is the possibility we may become hostages. Major Yin's party has secured the city's principal docking port. A pacification force from Battalion can dock with the city as soon as the Secretariat decides to send it in. The only thing that could stop them is a hostage situation."

"We're already hostages," Mr. Torisoti said. "They can put a hole in this ship anytime they want to."

"You have your emergency suits. The batteries are still working. I've been ordered to hold out as long as we can. Every hour we hold out can make a difference."

Mr. Torisoti's hands rose above the back of his couch. "You told us your armor system was *containing* the attack. Now you're sitting there telling us it didn't defend us after all—but we're still all right because we have wonderful, fully charged batteries. How many other stories are we supposed to believe, Lieutenant?"

"The enemy vehicle is apparently carrying a new kind of mole."

"And how about their defensive system? How much damage did you do to them?"

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"We may have a problem there, too. I can't say anything for sure, obviously. But they aren't acting like they've suffered anything serious."

Daj entered two sets of keywords into his news program: "Huanying City" and "pacification force." The last time he had looked, the Secretariat had still been "considering the possibility" it might send a full-scale pacification force to the city. Now his screen responded to his search order by presenting him with the same dispatch he had looked at twenty minutes ago. The international politicians in Singapore were following their usual pattern and postponing the moment when they would have to make a decision.

In Daj's opinion, the politicians had made their first mistake when they had decided to "show the flag" and post his mother and seven troopers in Huanying City. They had a full battalion of heavily armed troops standing by in Sergeant Wei Base—the military outpost the Secretariat had established in Mercury orbit. If they had sent a full pacification force right at the start, the current outbreak could have been smothered while it was still building up.

It wasn't the first time Daj had decided the world would be a saner place if people like him were running things. He was, after all, significantly more intelligent than the adults who constituted the current intellectual elite.

"I don't understand this," Ms. Ankala said. "We're on board a military vehicle. How can these people have weapons that are more advanced than the weapons we're carrying?"

"It's a recurrent problem," Mr. Torisoti said. "I've heard my wife rant about it a thousand times. The military and police forces are trapped in an arms race with hobbyists and intellectual sociopaths—people who feel they have to spend their days developing weapons and armor that are superior to the equipment the authorities use. Then they sell the fabrication programs to people who are willing to sell them to hotheads and political fanatics. The insurgents in Huanying City have somebody rich on their side. It's a wonder anybody is surprised."

"It doesn't take anything to produce new warheads once you get the programs," Daj said. "The fabricator we've got in the back of this vehicle could produce thousands of them in an hour."

"That's very informative," Ms. Ankala said. "Are we the only people who have to worry about these superior missiles? Can't they use them against the armor your wives will be wearing, too?"

"Lieutenant Kim is dealing with moles that attack inanimate objects," Father Hong said. "Still, if the insurgent forces can get their hands on superior anti-equipment moles, they can probably acquire superior anti-personnel missiles, too. I suspect my wife has already advised her detachment they should start reviewing their cover and concealment training."

"We have two children with us," Ms. Ankala said. "Don't you care about them? Do you think Wanshu 's father would sit there in the pilot's seat and calmly tell her she had to die like a soldier?"

"No one is going to die," Kim said. "We are merely being asked to hold out as long as we possibly can."

"And you can guarantee that, Lieutenant? You can be absolutely certain nothing is going to happen to this child while we sit here?"

Kim swung his couch around and presented them with its featureless rear surface. "I have my orders," he said over the speaker system. "We are supposed to hold out as long as we can. If you have any objections to that decision, you should present your opinions to the people who made it."

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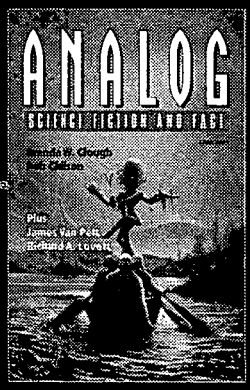

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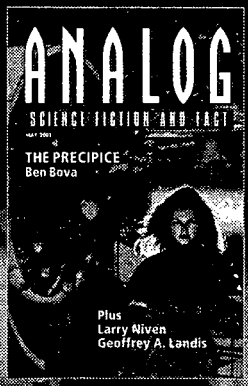

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said.

"Tell me where to send the message," Ms. Ankala said. "I'm just a guest here. They're not going to punish a veteran sergeant just because they got a few words from some woman he took up with for awhile."

The calm, vaguely female Voice of the vehicle broke into their arguments. "May I please have your attention. Please don your pressure suits. My armor system has received additional extensive damage. My hull could be breached at any time if the attack continues. I will now talk you through the donning procedure."

Cubical packages popped out of overhead hatches. Daj stretched out his arms in response to the Voice's first instruction and extended the pressure suit.

"Stay in step with the instructions," his father said. "Don't try to anticipate. This is no time to rely on your memory."

Daj rolled his eyes. He had been running through pressure suit drills since he had been two years younger than Wan.

The suit was a skintight, like all emergency suits, and it had been designed so it could be worn over clothing. Embedded moles adjusted it to his measurements. A hose jacked into an oxygen supply tube that ran along the side of the passenger area.

The Voice put them through a radio check before it launched into its closing encouragements. "You are all tied into the emergency communications network," the Voice said. "You will all use the same frequency from now until the end of the emergency. Please avoid unnecessary conversation. Please keep the network clear. Thank you for your cooperation. You have completed the emergency donning procedure in three minutes and thirty-nine seconds—a time that puts you in the 89th percentile. The record for this vehicle, under drill conditions, is three minutes and seventeen seconds. Congratulations."

Ms. Ankala had grabbed a handhold and pulled herself into a position next to Wan's couch. Her skintight had wrinkled her clothes when it pressed itself around her, but Daj could still respond to the swell of her breasts and the long curve of her waist and hips.

"I've heard everything I need to hear," Ms. Ankala said. "I'm taking this child out of here. Will you please open a hatch, Lieutenant?"

"It's ridiculous to tell us we should avoid becoming hostages," Mr. Torisoti said. "We're already hostages. They can kill all of us anytime they want to."

Kim swung his couch around. "Please return to your couch, Ms. Ankala. I'm trying to track a very complicated situation. I would appreciate it if you didn't create distractions."

"You have a young girl here. A child. You've been outmaneuvered. Mr. Torisoti already said it. The Voice just confirmed it. They can put a hole in this vehicle any time they want to. Why don't you admit it and let us get these children out of danger?"

Lieutenant Kim pulled his side arm out of its belt case. His left hand jabbed at the control screen set into the top of the handgrip. "Please return to your couch, Ms. Ankala. The moles I've selected can anesthetize you in one and a half seconds under normal conditions. They may have to spend some extra time burrowing through your pressure suit, but it won't be more than a couple of seconds."

"That's a very forceful move, Lieutenant. Does it give you some emotional compensation for your failure to protect us from interception?"

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"Please do what Lieutenant Kim is asking," Daj's father said. "If he has to anesthetize you, it could create complications if they continue firing on us and compromise the hull. The child is safer here for the time being. We may have to surrender later, as Lieutenant Kim says. But right now she's better off in here."

Father Hong's voice sounded flat and unemotional. He was pronouncing each word with great precision. It was a speaking style Daj had only heard three or four times during his childhood—and always on occasions when Yin Hong thought his son was pressing against an important limit. Lately Daj had been hearing it more often.

"Do you feel that way about your own son, too?" Ms. Ankala said. "Are you willing to leave him here, too?"

"I feel the evidence indicates he'll be safer here. No one can be sure about these things. But I do feel it's the less risky option."

"And you'll be doing your duty," Mr. Torisoti said. "You've bought the whole package, haven't you? Honor. Duty. *Sacrifice*."

"I feel it's the safest choice. I would feel that way if I were just an ordinary civilian passenger, with no military ties. If they get us inside their own vehicle, they could drag this situation out for days. The longer hostage situations last, the more unpredictable they become."

"Are you thinking like a noncombatant?" Mr. Torisoti said. "Or like someone who's supposed to support his wife's mission? Your wife is a commissioned officer, Dr. Yin. Your family has an ideal, right? And you're all supposed to live up to it. Even the children."

Daj's earphones picked up a gasp. He couldn't tell whether it had come from his father or Lieutenant Kim, but Lieutenant Kim was the most probable source. Father Hong would have been feeling the same emotions but he would have responded with a frown, not a vocalization. Mr. Torisoti had stepped into forbidden territory.

Daj twisted around on his couch and stuck his head into the aisle. "They aren't going to destroy this whole vehicle and kill us all. They're caught in the hostage paradox. They're bluffing. They don't have any hostages if they kill all of us. They have to get two or three of us under control. Then they can kill one of us to prove they mean business. And still have hostages."

"Precisely," Father Hong said. "That's exactly the kind of thing I was thinking about. Thank you, Daj. I really think you should case your weapon, Lieutenant. I'm certain Ms. Ankala can see the logic in Daj's argument."

Lieutenant Kim stiffened. Daj had felt Kim was putting himself in a bad position when he had drawn his side arm. Daj couldn't have explained why it was a bad idea. He had just known it felt wrong. Now Kim had another anxiety to ponder. He was receiving a firm suggestion from the husband of his commanding officer.

"I'm just trying to think about the girl," Ms. Ankala said. "I don't know anything about all this military talk."

Kim lowered his gun. "The people in the other vehicle have been advised that they have to negotiate with Battalion. Battalion is talking with them now, in fact. Battalion has also advised me Mercury is sending us a package with extra batteries. Battalion will send us a package, too."

"And what happens if the Heavenlies shoot at the packages?" Mr. Torisoti asked.

"I'm hoping we can outmaneuver them. Whatever happens, we have plen-

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ty of time. We still have some solar power. Our batteries can last many more hours. Battalion is getting advice from a hostage consultation committee that includes the most experienced combat psychologist in the Brigade. Our best move now is to sit tight."

Kim had returned his weapon to its case while he talked. "If you would just return to your seat, Ms. Ankala. *Please*. It would be very much appreciated."

Ms. Ankala patted Wan's shoulder. The girl had slid down in her couch and folded her arms in front of her chest while they were arguing. Now she looked up at Ms. Ankala and smiled. Ms. Ankala gave her another pat and pulled herself back to her couch.

"It's a standoff," Mr. Torisoti said. "They can't kill us, and the Singapore Sages can't order an attack on the city."

"There's one other factor," Father Hong said. "If anything happens to us—our assailants know the Brigade will kill them. The Brigade will make no attempt to take prisoners. Not in that situation."

"I'm afraid I don't find that very comforting, Dr. Yin."

The news media had started focusing on Yin Cam. Daj found her name on five headlines when he turned back to his notescreen. She was clearly the officer in the most dramatic situation. Three of the news stories noted that her little squad would be faced with overwhelming odds if one of the factions tried to drive them away from the docking port. Her slim good looks obviously added to the appeal of the story.

Major Yin has never been in actual combat before but she is considered a cool, superbly competent officer. . . . Her scores in countless simulations have consistently placed her in the top 5 percent. . . . Her judges have repeatedly commented on her ability to make quick decisions under conditions of high stress. . . .

There had been no parting words when Daj and Father Hong had left Huanying City. Daj had learned the civilians were being evacuated when Lieutenant Kim had rapped on his door and marched into his room without waiting for an answer.

"The Major has ordered us to evacuate," Kim had said. "She wants us to just stop what we're doing and go. She's already started leading the combat squad toward their first positions."

Yin Cam had given the order at the last minute, just before she and her troops moved out. "You've got three minutes to grab your emergency kit and line up," Kim said. "It's a tight schedule but she felt it was necessary. This way the locals won't see us evacuating before they already know something's happening."

There had been a time, when Daj had just turned five, when he had wondered why they kept telling him Yin Cam was one of his mothers. He knew his other mother, Yin Xu, really was one of his mothers. He saw Mother Xu every day, sometimes for hours at a time. But how was he supposed to react to this woman who kept sending him messages from a military base in the asteroid belt? Why did they keep telling him she was Mother Cam?

Say hello to Mother Cam, Daj.

Show Mother Cam how you hit the bell with your ball.

Let's give Mother Cam a really nice goodnight message.

Daj was the child of a double marriage—two military parents and two civilian parents. Military-civilian quartets had become one of the commoner

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arrangements in the military community. The military husband and wife could accept all the disruptive postings that came along as they tried to advance their careers, and the civilian husband and wife could stay in one place and see that the children received a reasonably stable home life. Sometimes—as now—a military spouse and a civilian spouse went off together and the other military spouse stayed home with the other civilian spouse. There had even been a period when all four of his parents had been home at the same time. It had been like a house party that lasted over one eyear.

Yin Cam was Daj's primary biological mother. Most of his basic natural genes came from her and Father Hong. Yin Cam had even carried him in her body during the first fifteen tendays of his development. Mother Xu had contributed about 5 percent of his genes. His military father, Yin Joong, had contributed another 5 percent. The rest of his genome had been decided by discussion. Some of the discussions, he had gathered, had been exhaustingly lengthy. There had been a general consensus on how intelligent he should be—the maximum they could arrange—and the best way to handle tradeoffs like muscularity vs. agility. The big disagreements, as always, had centered on personality traits.

Both his mothers had campaigned for a high level of assertiveness. "An over-assertive person can develop self-control," Mother Cam argued. "But you can't turn a rabbit into a wolf."

Father Joong preferred more relaxed, easy-going personalities (which might explain why he was only a Communications Lieutenant-Major while his military wife was a full Combat Major). Father Hong adapted a neutral stance.

Genetics only affected the physiological aspects of personality formation. After his birth Daj's four parents engaged in more debate as they put him through programmed experiences that reinforced certain traits and discouraged others.

The result of all the debating was a boy who was slender and just a fingernail over average height, with a 98th percentile reaction time and an IQ that was 35 percent better than Father Hong's. On the assertiveness scale Daj tested at the top of the middle range. His facial features and most of his other personality traits had been left to the effects of random influences.

Some things couldn't be controlled, of course. Daj had spent most of his childhood in a massive structure that orbited the Moon—Hammarskjöld Station, the headquarters of the off-Earth military forces of the Secretariat. His formative years had been dominated by a visual environment that surrounded him with square angles, obsessively neat spaces, and endless expanses of light-blue walls. His playmates had been drawn from a pool of three hundred children who had all been shaped by the same milieu.

His only respite was his trips to the Moon. Earth people usually commented on the "sterility" of the lunar cities. To Daj, they had seemed incredibly chaotic and colorful. Vines spilled out of garden boxes. People twisted and dodged as they hurried through overcrowded corridors. Stores bombarded him with appeals and displays.

Once, when he had been seven, Mother Cam had taken Daj and his sister on a lunar tour that lasted three whole tendays. She had given them her complete, undivided attention from the moment they boarded the shuttle. She fed them almost everything they wanted. She took them to every place her counseling program recommended. She laid a game screen on the floor

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of their hotel room and laughed as she let them back her ships into an undefendable corner.

Mother Cam had developed three distinct personalities, in Daj's opinion. She switched them on and off as if she were loading computer programs. She was the stiff figure who sent them messages from far-off places. She was the playmate and companion whose only interest in life was the fun they could have together. And sometimes—usually without warning—she turned into a person who wanted something from him. A person who obviously had some plan her son was supposed to carry out.

The Huanying City brawl had started attracting some of the higher level news merchants. A familiar bright-eyed face smiled up at him as he flipped through the news banks. He switched to full video and let her voice dance in his left earphone.

"It isn't hard to imagine Major Yin's feelings," Ms. Bright Eyes counseled her multi-million, multimedia audience. "Mercury headquarters has advised us she has been told about the situation her son and her husband are facing. Major Yin evacuated the civilian associates of her unit because she thought they would be safer if they returned to battalion headquarters. Instead, they are now de facto hostages of the Heavenly Union faction. They are in more danger at this moment than Major Yin and her heavily armed soldiers. Major Yin has refused all our requests to interview her. Our only information on her current state of mind is a statement from her military superiors. They have every confidence, they assure us, that she will do her duty."

"But what is Major Yin's duty? We are already receiving comments from our news community. A content analysis of a random sample indicates our community is equally divided between people who think her military responsibilities should take precedence over her family and people who feel her family should always come before everything else. Twenty percent condemn the Heavenly Union Society for placing her in such a dilemma."

The other vehicle was growing larger. Daj judged its speed and estimated it would close the gap in about twenty minutes.

"I don't suppose we're going to lob a few moles at them," Mr. Torisoti said.

"For the time being, we're going to conserve energy," Lieutenant Kim answered.

Daj had scanned two news stories that discussed the weapons the Heavenly Union vehicle was using. One focused on an angry statement from an official in Singapore. *The officer in command of the Secretariat vehicle is obviously faced with an advanced molecular weapons system—a system no civilian vehicle is supposed to be equipped with. The criminals who traffic in illegal fabrication programs are violating laws that deal with life and death matters. The international community must stop thinking of the illegal program trade as a harmless form of smuggling. Citizens must understand a basic truth—they may be condemning innocent people to death when they fail to report violations of the law.*

You needed two items if you wanted to make something with a fabricator: raw materials and a fabrication program. For a molecular weapons system, the raw materials could be as cheap as sand and a few grams of common metals. The important item was the program.

Daj could see the projectile launchers sticking out of a hatch when the other vehicle was about a kilometer away. Other than that, it looked like a

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normal civilian utility transport. Big solar panels jutted from eight long girders. A skin of solar panels covered the outside of the hull. Standard international ID numbers had been painted on the hatches.

The vehicle started station-keeping at a hundred and fifty meters. Kim swung his couch around.

"How many people here have some experience with weapons?"

"I do," Father Hong said. "I've worked out regularly with my wife and Yin Joong—the military husband in our family. I think I've fired all the standard side arms and assault arms."

"Ms. Ankala?"

"The only weapons I've seen up until now are the things actors wave around on videos."

"Mr. Torisoti?"

"What do you have in mind?"

"I can issue you an assault gun loaded with nonlethal moles. If they know we have two or three people armed that way, they probably won't try to board and enter. Not if they're intelligent. We'll be operating at close quarters and we can blaze away without the slightest fear we'll do anybody any permanent damage."

"How does it work?" Mr. Torisoti asked.

"You push a safety switch forward if you think you may have to use it. After that, in a situation like this, you point it in the direction you want to shoot and press the activation button. It fires for two seconds every time you push the button."

"And the moles are just anesthetics?"

"They multiply as soon as they penetrate the skin and neutralize selected types of neurotransmitters."

"I believe I can handle that," Mr. Torisoti said. "I've never touched a modern weapon, but I've been studying archery since I was a boy, if that means anything."

Lieutenant Kim released his couch straps and pulled himself around the crowded forward area. A bulkhead panel popped open as he approached it. He removed two assault guns and clicked cassettes into their sides. "You probably won't have to use these at all. I'll let them know I've armed my passengers if they indicate they really think they can come in here and force us out."

Daj had squirmed around in his seat harness so he could get a better view of the arrangement behind the panel. He could only see about half of it but it looked like it contained several more weapons.

"Lieutenant Kim—what happens if we're attacked by boarders who've armored their suits with the same kind of armor you think they're using on their vehicle?"

Daj had been thinking in Techno-Mandarin but he had switched to Ghurkali before he had finished voicing Kim's name. Father Hong responded by barking at him in Techno-Mandarin.

"This is no time to be showing off your linguistic abilities, Daj. Lieutenant Kim has enough on his mind."

"I was only going to suggest he could give me a gun, too. If they're wearing some kind of special armor, we'll need all the firepower we can put together."

Lieutenant Kim was still holding himself near the weapons locker. He shifted his position and Daj found himself looking directly at the blank visor.

"And what kind of weapons training have you had, young man?"

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"I've been going to the range with my parents since I was ten."

"Would you gentlemen mind speaking a language we all understand?" Mr. Torisoti asked. "I'd like to know what's going on here."

"Yin Daj wants a weapon, too," Kim said. "I think that would be up to your father, Daj."

"You know I'm right," Daj said in Ghurkali. "If they can install enhanced armor on their vehicle, they can install it in their suits, too."

"I don't think we have to make a decision now," Father Hong said. "Lieutenant Kim can issue you a weapon if we see boarders approaching. The fact that you already know how to use one means he can just hand it to you and assume you know how to operate it."

The strip at the top of Daj's notescreen contained a special symbol—the two ancient Chinese characters that represented "parent." The symbol started blinking and Daj immediately touched it with his finger.

Father Hong had been writing while he talked. *Please be quiet, Daj. Lieutenant Kim is dealing with a very volatile emotional situation. This is no time to be blurting out every thought that comes into your head.*

In Huanying City, the fighting seemed to be settling into a pattern. People were still enduring random horrors here and there, but the news media could display maps that divided the city into two sections—a large section controlled by the Heavenlies and their allies, and a smaller section that was being defended by the original investors and their heirs. Much of the fighting was now concentrated on the control center for the primary mirror system.

The surface of Huanying City was covered with solar collectors but the city received most of its power from two ten-kilometer mirrors. The mirrors followed the city around Mercury and constantly adjusted their positions as they focused the sun's fury on the heat exchangers that dominated the exterior of the primary power station. The control center for the power station was located inside the city, on the edge of the area controlled by the original investors. The investors had set up a defensive perimeter in the corridors that led to it and the Heavenlies were slowly pushing them back.

The investors had appealed to the Secretariat for help. As the legitimate government of the city, they had announced they would accept a pacification force and Secretariat arbitration.

"Are we supposed to wear these suits for *seventy-two hours?*" Ms. Ankala asked.

"An emergency suit can be worn almost indefinitely," Lieutenant Kim said. "But most people find it unpleasant. I'm setting up a schedule. You can rotate out of your suits for half an hour at a time, one by one. That way you can eat and take care of your biological functions. I suggest we start with you and Wan together. That way you can give her any assistance she needs."

"Women and children first," Mr. Torisoti said.

Daj smiled at Kim's prim, military use of the term *biological functions*. The "personal hygiene utilities" in the suits could break down and recycle "biological waste" but they could take two hours to do the job.

On his notescreen Mercury was once again becoming larger. Their second pass would bring them within two hundred kilometers of the planet's surface. Each orbit would last fifteen hours and twenty minutes.

Mercury launched six battery packs just after they passed their low point. "Mercury will be controlling the packs until they get within eight hundred meters," Kim announced. "Then I'll have to take over. I'll be keeping our en-

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ergy consumption to a minimum, but you may experience some sharp accelerations."

Daj took the information from Kim's briefing and set up a model on his notescreen. Each battery weighed one hundred kilograms and the complete pack included one hundred and fifty kilograms of maneuvering fuel. Battalion was hoping six packs would present enough targets that some of them would get through. Each battery, according to the information in the databanks, would add twelve hours to the vehicle's energy supply.

On the other hand, Kim would also be using up energy as he maneuvered the vehicle. The maneuvering thrusters and the projectile launchers both used electrical energy. The projectile launchers pushed their loads into space with magnetic pistons and the thrusters pulled reaction mass through magnetic fields. Every time Kim fired a thruster, he would be using up energy that could be used to launch projectiles.

The model also had to include assumptions about the defensive capabilities of the battery packs. All molecular defense systems could be overwhelmed if you scored enough hits in a limited time period. So how many hits should he assume the battery packs could absorb? He could make some assumptions based on the offensive power the enemy had demonstrated when they overwhelmed the defensive moles carried by a standard military transport vehicle. If you calculated for a range between . . .

Daj concluded that a pilot could pluck two battery packs out of space if his midrange assumptions were correct and the pilot did everything perfectly. If the pilot didn't do everything perfectly, he might manage to snare one.

Daj arranged his conclusions into an orderly presentation and transmitted them to his father's notescreen.

Is it worth making the effort, Doctor?

He has to maintain the belief we're doing something, Daj. I'll repeat what I said before—he's dealing with a very volatile psychological situation.

But is it worth it if we waste energy? And shorten the time we have?

That's not a decision for your level of responsibility. Or mine.

The encounter with the packages lasted about four minutes. The enemy vehicle picked up the packages on its radar screens a few seconds before Kim acquired them. Two of the packages immediately informed Kim they had been damaged beyond repair.

Kim ordered the packages to increase their speed and edged toward the other vehicle, in the hope that he could place his own vehicle between the packages and the enemy projectile launchers. Three packages shot past him on the outside track. One package skimmed between him and the enemy ship and promptly received a volley that produced another damaged-beyond-repair message.

The other three packages were moving too fast. Kim realized they were going to slip past the front of his vehicle and ordered an acceleration that jolted his passengers against their seats. Wan let out an excited shriek. Two of the packages emerged from the protection Kim was trying to give them and he collected two more death messages. He gave the vehicle another jolt of forward acceleration and decelerated three seconds later.

Daj scanned the external cameras. Kim had matched orbits with the sixth package. He could open a hatch and bring the package inside with the last of its maneuvering fuel.

"Not bad," Father Hong said in Techno-Mandarin. "I suspect that was a lot harder than it looked."

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Daj switched back to his modeling screen. The mass of the transport vehicle was a matter of record. He would have to estimate the change in velocity Kim had achieved with his last two accelerations, but he could make a reasonable guess. Kim's maneuvers had burned up three to five hours' worth of energy. The battery would give them an extra twelve hours, so they had gained seven to nine hours altogether.

The insurgents had started issuing messages that were addressed to the military personnel who had children on the transport vehicle. Assault Sergeant Song was publicly reminded that he was a single father who was the only person responsible for the welfare of his daughter, Wanshu .

"We regret that your child is alone among strangers," a spokeswoman for the Heavenly Union Society said. "A member of our organization is fully prepared to cross the distance between the two vehicles and carry her to the safe refuge we are preparing for her. There is no reason any child should be harmed by this dispute."

The spokeswoman carefully avoided any indication Wan would be injured if her father went on fighting, Daj noted. With Yin Cam she took a more direct approach.

"You are fighting a useless battle, Major Yin. Your attempts at defensive action will inevitably be defeated by our superior numbers. Why not yield now and relieve your child of the stress he is enduring? You are an expert on military tactics. You know your position is hopeless."

There was no response from Mother Cam or Sergeant Song, of course. The news merchants had to content themselves with the stock images they had been displaying ever since the crisis had started.

I'm not under stress, Daj wrote on his notescreen. *Any reports you may have seen in the news media are grossly exaggerated. I'm finding the whole experience rather interesting, in fact.*

I rather thought you would, Father Hong replied. *I suspect your mother is primarily worried about the possibility you're harassing Lieutenant Kim with tactical suggestions.*

I do have a few ideas, now that you mention it.

The intercom picked up a chuckle from Father Hong. *I think we can save them for a little longer.*

The messages from the Heavenlies made for good dramatic copy but they couldn't fill all the space and time the news media had at their disposal. The media military experts had pondered Mother Cam's situation and produced diagrams that depicted the best defensive arrangements she could set up. On the surface of the asteroid, they pointed out, her troops could dig up rocks and dirt and place barricades *here* and *here*. Inside the city, in the corridors leading to the docking port, she would probably post troops at *these three* positions.

She should also keep at least one person in reserve, the experts all agreed. She only had seven troops altogether, so none of these points could be heavily defended. . . .

"It's nice of them to give the Heavenlies a few tactical tips," Mr. Torisoti said. "Why don't they just ask her for a map of her positions and transmit it to the Heavenly headquarters?"

"Why don't they just pull them out?" Ms. Ankala said. "If the situation is that bad . . ."

"That would require a decision. If our elected leaders follow their usual

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pattern, they'll talk forever and do something decisive after we've had a disaster and everything is ten times harder. And ten times more dangerous for the people who have to do the fighting. They'll jabber at each other until we've got one soldier left in the city. Then they'll finally realize they have to issue an order that may cost them a few dozen votes in the next election. And the battalion will have to take a port by assault when it attacks the city."

"That's a cheerful assessment," Ms. Ankala said.

"It's what politicians always do. Your sergeant would say the same thing if he were here."

The parent symbol on Daj's notescreen lit up. *Is it possible Mr. Torisoti is less of a civilian than he thinks he is? Do I hear the voice of a typical sergeant? Will he be telling us next that the Brigade isn't what it used to be?*

Daj smiled. His civilian mother was a sergeant's daughter. She had joined a military-civilian quartet, she claimed, because she had never felt quite at home in a purely civilian environment.

If you know you're a civilian, Mother Xu liked to say, you aren't.

The commander of Mercury Battalion was a senior colonel whose official biography included an advanced degree in political sociology. In the complicated social life of the Brigade, Colonel Mungveli was Mother Cam's commanding officer and one of Father Hong's former students. At the moment, however, he seemed to be thinking more like a soldier than a politician. A brief dispatch from Battalion headquarters announced that he was sending a "rescue force" to Huanying City. The force would match orbits with the city and be prepared to reinforce Major Yin's platoon if it came under attack.

"This force is apparently the same size as the proposed pacification force currently being discussed in Singapore," Daj's favorite newscaster pontificated. "Is Colonel Mungveli taking the situation into his own hands? The legal situation is murky. Colonel Mungveli could, on his own authority, put troops into the city on the grounds that he was merely defending his own personnel. Would the Secretariat back him? Or would they feel he had to be replaced with someone who might be more patient? And what would happen to the hostages on Transport Vehicle Nineteen if he carried out his threat?"

Mr. Torisoti grunted. "It looks like we have a commanding officer who has something on his mind besides his career."

"And what about us?" Ms. Ankala said. "We aren't exactly sitting in our own homes watching this on our screens, Mr. Torisoti."

The batteries from Battalion arrived as they were starting their third orbit. This time Kim seemed to be better prepared. Three packages made it through the initial barrage and he managed to match orbits with two. Daj counted six short, gentle accelerations. His best estimate indicated they had gained at least nineteen hours of battery time.

Kim had organized a watch system in the middle of their second orbit. Father Hong kept an eye on Kim's screens while Kim took a six hour sleep break.

"Are we instituting some kind of chain of command system?" Mr. Torisoti asked. "Are we going by our spouses' ranks now?"

Father Hong turned away from the screens and grinned. "It's an old military custom. According to my researches, back in the days when the soldiers

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were all men, their wives used to form elaborate social hierarchies based on the ranks their husbands had attained."

For Daj, sleep was a dilemma. The adults could activate embedded sleep control programs, but he was still operating on a natural sleep schedule. He wouldn't receive a full featured adult sleep enhancement until he passed his twenty-first birthday and his development specialist gave it her approval. He decided his best option would be naps that lasted one or two hours. He would eat and clean up the next time he took one of his half-hour vacations from his suit. Then he would tighten his seat harness until it was pressing him snugly against his couch, clip his notescreen to the lap belt, and think about his last trip to the Moon, or some other pleasant memory.

It all worked according to plan right up to the moment he brought up all the visual and tactile memories associated with the girl he had danced with in a lunar garden he had visited on his own. It had only been the third or fourth time he had put his arms around a girl his own age. He had been dazed by her slimness and the looseness of her movements. He had made a complete fool of himself when the dance had ended but nothing could spoil the things he had felt when he had been holding her.

"You'd better wake up," his father said. "It looks like we're getting some developments."

He looked around him groggily. Ms. Ankala was staring at him. He frowned at the pilot's compartment and realized Kim had returned to his post.

His notescreen was turned away from him. He flipped it around and stared at the numbers on the time strip.

"The Lieutenant took you out of the circuit," Ms. Ankala said. "So you wouldn't be disturbed."

"*You let me sleep over seven and a half hours!*"

"They've started attacking our position in the city," Father Hong said. "We just got the news. It started about five minutes ago."

Daj's hands jumped to the notescreen. He switched to a text transcription of the latest news bulletin so he could skim it as fast as possible.

The Heavenlies had released a statement claiming they had launched an attack on the docking port. They had called on Major Yin to surrender and they had issued a warning to Colonel Mungveli.

The commander of the so-called rescue force should understand that we will not tolerate any illegal interference in our struggle for a just social order. The debates now taking place in Singapore demonstrate that many leading members of the international community recognize our right to reorganize our society. If Colonel Mungveli attempts to place armed troops on the surface of our city, we will respond with any option we consider appropriate. If it becomes necessary, we are fully prepared to destroy the transport vehicle we have taken prisoner and reload the surviving prisoners on our own vehicle.

The news media had asked Colonel Mungveli and Major Yin for their response but there had been no answer. A link referred the reader to a map that showed the probable positions of the troops on both sides.

"Lieutenant Kim has an announcement," Father Hong said. "He felt you should be awake when he made it."

"I'm awake."

Lieutenant Kim turned his chair around. The black visor settled on Daj for a moment. Then it swung from left to right as Kim surveyed his charges.

"Colonel Mungveli has advised me he believes we are the key to the whole

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situation. If we were free, he could land troops at will. And give Major Yin all the support she needs. Two fully armed assault vehicles are now on their way here. The enemy has superior armor but we are confident the firepower on the two vehicles can defeat their armor with sustained fire lasting two to four minutes. Once the enemy vehicle has been silenced, the assault troops should be able to rescue all of us in a few minutes, even if this vehicle is destroyed. The Colonel wants your approval before he orders the assault vehicles to open fire. They'll be here in about eighty-five minutes, so we have time to discuss the matter."

"And what happens if we don't give him our approval?" Mr. Torisoti asked. "Will he still give the order to open fire? What's he looking for? Some kind of legal cover if we all get killed?"

"We believe we can get everyone out of this alive. They can't destroy this vehicle in two or three minutes—or even four if it takes that long to shut them down. They can put some big holes in it but they can't destroy it. We should all be safe if we stay under cover until their weapons are silenced."

"You haven't answered his question," Ms. Ankala said. "Will your colonel give the order to fire if we don't give him our consent?"

"He has another option. He can place the two assault vehicles close to the enemy vehicle. They'll be in position to open fire if the enemy starts firing at us. He would rather have our vehicles fire first. He would rather know we're safe before he decides to commit troops to Huanying City."

Ms. Ankala tipped back her head. "Has he considered withdrawing Major Yin's force? Isn't that an option, too?"

"Colonel Mungveli has asked me to show you a statement he's recorded. If you'll swing your couches around and turn your attention to the briefing screen unfolding at the rear of the cabin."

Colonel Mungveli was a compact, burly man who had achieved high level black belt status in three martial arts. Daj had watched Colonel Mungveli laugh with his parents as they drank together after a dinner party. He had even seen the Colonel cast moist glances at Mother Cam when she had walked across the room in a silk gown and her commanding officer had thought no one was watching him. Now he opened his statement by adapting the easy, conversational manner he used when he discussed military matters with groups of civilian family members. He was wearing a slightly rumpled duty uniform and he had posed himself against a plain blue background. He started off by advising them that all the people in Major Yin's platoon were alive and unharmed. He assured them the platoon had established solid defensive positions "in spite of the tactical advice our adversaries have received from the news media."

"I have to tell you, however—I wouldn't be doing my duty if I didn't—that Major Yin's force is heavily outnumbered. If they don't receive more support from our main force—they will inevitably be overrun. They can put up a good fight. They can inflict fifteen casualties for every casualty the enemy imposes on them. But sooner or later, numbers are going to prevail."

"The fact that the other side has better equipment could be relevant, too," Mr. Torisoti murmured.

"I would like to land a support force sometime within the next three hours. All our calculations indicate we should do it as soon as possible. The only thing that's holding me back is my concern for your safety. I realize we're asking you to take a significant risk. No one can guarantee any military operation will be one hundred percent successful. I wouldn't consider

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asking you to take such a risk normally. But I have to think about the welfare of Major Yin and her platoon, too."

Colonel Mungveli paused. He turned slightly and the camera followed him around and picked up the edge of a wall-mounted Brigade insignia—two knives crossed over a sun-and-planets montage, with the Brigade motto inscribed on the rim.

"The commander of the assault vehicles has advised me he can receive your answer at any time up to ten minutes before he arrives. I won't try to tell you what you should do. Only you can decide that. I can only tell you the troops coming to your aid have been given orders that reflect the oldest traditions of our calling. They have been told they should take any risk to secure your safety. They know there are two Brigade children on board. Lieutenant Kim will issue both children special electronic and visual markers so they can be identified and given the appropriate priority."

He paused again. "We will abide by your decision, whatever it is."

"That's very nice," Mr. Torisoti said. "He gets the pay and we have to make his decisions for him."

"Your colonel is a real expert at emotional manipulation," Ms. Ankala said. "It's all my choice but your families may get killed if I don't give him my consent. I still haven't heard one good reason why he can't just evacuate them."

"They're holding a port," Daj said. "It's just like Mr. Torisoti said. If he pulls them out now, the secretariat can come back two days from now and tell him he has to land a pacification force. And the force may have to lose people forcing a port."

"And if we don't agree, your colonel will land his force and they'll have to rescue us anyway."

"He hasn't said he'll land the force if we don't agree," Lieutenant Kim said. "He's merely indicated that's one of his options."

"It sounds like blackmail to me," Ms. Ankala said. "Either we tell him yes or he lands his force and the rescue team has to save us without the advantage of surprise."

"He wants us to give him a nice secure political cover in case it all goes wrong," Mr. Torisoti said. "That's all he's doing. He's just trying to protect his career."

Ms. Ankala folded her arms over her chest. "We'll have projectiles flying all over the place. We'll be huddling behind pieces of our vehicle waiting for the assault troops while the recycling units in our suits use up energy. We've got two children with us. Does he really think Major Yin or Sergeant Song will feel better if they know he's putting their children in that kind of position?"

"How much advantage will surprise give the rescuers?" Daj asked. "How close can they get before they're detected?"

"That's the one area where we're confident we have an advantage," Kim said. "We've been analyzing their radar emissions and it looks like they just have ordinary civilian radar. Our vehicles should be able to fire for at least fifteen seconds—maybe more—before the other side knows they're there."

"They could deliver a lot of moles in fifteen seconds," Father Hong said.

"And the other side could fire a lot of stuff at us in two or three minutes," Ms. Ankala said.

Daj was flipping through the news banks as he followed the argument. Father Hong obviously wanted to give Colonel Mungveli an affirmative an-

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swer. Mr. Torisoti was grumbling and making cynical remarks, but Daj believed he would vote yes too, once he had vented his objections. It was a type of behavior that had been well documented. Mr. Torisoti was torn between two powerful emotions. So he resolved the conflict by verbalizing one set of feelings and acting on the other.

That left Ms. Ankala. For her, the critical issue was the presence of the children. She didn't realize he was an adult by any rational standard, but that didn't matter. She would have clung to the same argument if Wan had been on board by herself. Personally, he didn't see what difference age made. You could just as easily argue that adults were more valuable, since society had made a bigger investment in them. His father's brain contained the results of years of study and experience. How could you claim a child was more important?

The Brigade had engaged in a full scale armed intervention about once every twenty years. Daj could roll off the name and date of every "commitment," from the Lumina Mining Asteroid Incident to the Nousavon Rebellion. Brigade children learned the roster in the same way they automatically acquired everyday facts like the location of the childcare center and the difference between a senior colonel and a logistics lieutenant-major. Now he was tabulating the number of days the Secretariat had dithered before it gave the critical orders. He decided he would count from the time the Singapore politicians had first put each matter on their formal agenda. If you used that as a starting point, their average time to decision had been eight days. In almost every case, they had been faced with some kind of violent behavior when they had started talking.

"It could be most of a tenday before the Secretariat decides to order an intervention," Daj said. "That's their historical average."

Father Hong chuckled. "Thank you, young man. That could be a relevant bit of information."

"You're welcome, Doctor."

Ms. Ankala pulled herself around in her couch. "That's not your responsibility. *Your mother wants you to live.*"

"So does his father," Father Hong said.

"And you think we should subject him to the dangers Colonel Mungveli is proposing?"

"I believe he's in just as much danger sitting here doing nothing.""

"I've also got some right to think about my mother," Daj said.

"And the mission of the Fourth International Brigade," Mr. Torisoti said. "We mustn't forget our responsibilities to the mission."

"He's too young to think about things like that," Ms. Ankala said. "His parents are supposed to be thinking about him."

"There's half a million people in that city," Daj said. "I don't see why they shouldn't count for something, too."

Ms. Ankala stared at him. The front plate on her suit helmet blurred her face, but it seemed to him she looked years older than she had looked when she had first boarded the vehicle.

"I have a question," Father Hong said. "If we do send the Colonel an affirmative vote—would you be willing to look after Wan, Ms. Ankala?"

The gun didn't feel like the assault guns Daj had handled on the range. It was the same model but it seemed bigger and more awkward. The range guns seemed like toys by comparison. He had stuck the attachment patch

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to his seat harness and the gun made the couch seem crowded—as if he was sharing it with a large, ungainly animal.

"There's just one thing I want to emphasize," Father Hong said in Ghurkali. "For your mother's sake. And mine. Please remember what we told you—that's strictly a self-defense weapon. Our only objective in this situation is our personal survival. We're not here to attack our adversaries. That's a job for trained professionals."

"One minute," Lieutenant Kim said.

Daj was staring at the image of the other vehicle on his notescreen. Its projectile launchers were still trained on their hull. Kim had let their own vehicle assume a slow roll, to save reaction mass. The other pilot had apparently decided he should let his thrusters maintain a steady position.

He started to answer Father Hong and stopped when he realized his throat was tightening up. He closed his eyes. He sucked in a long breath.

"I understand."

"Thirty seconds."

The assault vehicles had instituted radio silence as soon as they had received the go-ahead message. Kim was counting off the seconds until the projected time of attack. There would be no indication the vehicles had actually started firing, of course. A mole attack was a silent, invisible invasion. The packages would sail through space in complete silence. The moles would land on the enemy hull and begin attacking its materials. The defensive moles would rush toward the endangered areas. It might be minutes before an outside observer could detect any damage.

Daj glanced at Ms. Ankala out of the corner of his eye. She had wrapped her arms around her shoulders as if she were hugging herself. She had asked Kim if she could take a tranquilizer and Father Hong and Mr. Torisoti had told her she shouldn't. They had both picked up the same bit of military wisdom from their wives. Combat veterans always claimed you needed every edge you could give yourself—including the emotional impetus created by anxiety.

"Zero. I'm initiating our defensive maneuvers."

The last reaction mass left in the thrusters shoved Daj into his couch. "We're now going straight 'up' in relation to our body positions," Kim said. "I've also initiated the rotation maneuver."

Daj had started to question the rotation maneuver during Kim's preliminary briefing. The parent symbol on his notescreen had lit up just as he opened his mouth. *Don't say it, Daj. Kim is in command. It's his decision. He knows the drawbacks.*

Kim was rotating their vehicle and turning its stern toward their adversary. The other vehicle would have to shoot at a smaller target. But the invading moles would land on the part of the vehicle that contained the batteries and the life support systems.

"I am repelling a molecular attack," the Voice said. "My hull could be breached within sixty seconds. Please prepare."

Ms. Ankala took her hands off her shoulders. She bent forward and touched Wan's arm. Wan patted her with her other hand—as if she were the one who was doing the comforting.

A new voice popped onto the communications network—a brisk, noticeably excited, unmistakably human voice. "Boathook, this is Scraper. We've commenced hostilities. We're taking fire but it's lighter than we expected. Are they firing at you?"

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"Affirmed," Kim said.

"We've been advised everyone on board your vehicle speaks Tech-Man. Is that true?"

"Affirmed."

"We are closing and firing. A rescue party is suited up, as promised."

"Emergency report," the Voice said. "I have a breach in my hull. In the stern plate. Third quadrant."

Father Hong had been asked to turn his couch around so he could observe the rear of the vehicle. The rest of them were still facing Kim's back.

"I can't see it," Father Hong said. "It must be behind the fabricator."

"Did you hear that, Scraper?"

"Affirmed, Boathook."

On Daj's notescreen, the image of the other vehicle had started to expand. It was coming straight at them, broadside.

Daj's suit rustled in response to the air rushing out of the breach. Rattles broke out all over the cabin. "Please detach your oxygen supply," the Voice said. "My oxygen source may be contaminated. Place yourself on your suit—"

The cabin lights winked out as Daj reached for his suit connection. Every mouth on the communications net seemed to gasp at once. Daj glanced at his notescreen and discovered he was looking at a dim, featureless glow. He jabbed a symbol with his finger and a frowning news pundit replaced the glow.

Kim's screens were still active, too. Kim apparently had a separate energy source in the prow of the vehicle. Daj's notescreen had gone blank because the external cameras were no longer transmitting. He still had access to a radio link and Kim still had some control over the vehicle.

On the other side of the aisle, Ms. Ankala was still reassuring Wan. She had her notescreen on and Daj could see glints of light reflecting from her suit connection tube. . . .

He ripped off his harness and shoved himself across the aisle. His arm stretched across Ms. Ankala's body. He grabbed a handhold with his other hand and pulled her connection out of the wall.

Kim had been exchanging words with Scraper. He had advised them he could no longer use his external cameras. Scraper had told him the enemy vehicle was closing in on his stern. There was still no indication the fire from the assault vehicles was damaging the enemy hull.

"I can see the damage to your stern," Scraper said. "The hole is getting wider every second. We're going to start transmitting the view from our cameras."

Kim swung his couch around. A beam shot out of the light built into his helmet. "Will you please get out of the aisle, Daj?"

Daj scowled. This was no time to argue or explain. "It looks like we're going to lose the whole stern," Father Hong said.

"Swing your couch around, Dr. Yin," Kim said. "I'll take them if they come through the hole."

"Let us know when you want us to help you, Lieutenant. You don't need to do this alone."

Daj stared at Kim's visor. What would Kim's face look like if he could see it now?

He was amazed at how calm he felt. Was he reacting this way because it all seemed unreal? Was his mind keeping everything at a distance?

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"Thank you, Ms. Ankala," Wan said.

"It's all right, flower. You're going to be all right."

"I think you should get your arm out of the aisle now. You could get hurt when they start shooting."

Somebody snorted. Daj thought it was Mr. Torisoti but he couldn't be sure. Father Hong would have been just as amused.

Ms. Ankala looked around the cabin. "You're all crazy. All of you. Even the children."

"Boathook, this is Scraper. We're detecting the first signs of hull damage in the enemy vehicle. They're now concentrating their fire on us. What's your status?"

"We have a very large opening in the stern. I'm assuming they'll be coming through. Can you send us reinforcements?"

"We are closing in on them. We will launch boarders when we have access. Please keep us informed."

Light flooded the cabin. Kim raised his side arm to chest height and pressed the activation button. A military visor could be linked directly to the sighting screen on a weapon and Kim had apparently opted to make the connection. He could aim the gun at the enemy without taking his eyes off the scene in front of him.

It was one of those moments when Daj's brain and hands reacted faster than his consciousness. Kim's shadow was expanding behind him . . . as if the light were coming toward him . . . as if armed men with lights on their suits were racing down the aisle behind Daj's back. . . .

Daj ripped his gun off his seat harness. He freed himself from the harness and jammed his body into the space between the end of his couch and the back of Mr. Torisoti's. The onrushing lights created wobbly, disorienting shadows. The only sound was the rush of words Kim was hammering at Scraper.

Daj raised the muzzle of his gun. One of the attackers was coming straight down the aisle but the shadows indicated one or two people were attacking over the tops of the couches. A pressure-suited figure passed over him and he followed his orders and took his thumb off the activation button.

"I'm being assaulted!" Kim clamored. "Three to one! Hand to hand!"

"We're launching reinforcements, Boathook. We've got an opening. In the enemy vehicle. We're on our way."

The vacuum in the vehicle created a silence that was as isolating as a windowless room. Father Hong and Mr. Torisoti were both retaining their communications discipline. Daj assumed they were both firing at the boarders, but how could he tell? For all he knew, they had both already succumbed to the effects of enemy projectiles.

Another pressure-suited figure hovered over Wan's couch. In the light from the boarder's headlamp, Daj could see Wan huddling in the space between the bottom of her couch and the floor—if you could think of something as the floor when you were in free fall. Ms. Ankala was still strapped into her couch harness. The boarder turned his head in her direction. The light from his lamp glittered on the folds of her suit. He grabbed a handhold and swung the muzzle of his gun toward her.

Daj shoved in his activation button as if he were trying to squeeze it into fragments. The boarder shifted holds and turned away from Ms. Ankala—probably in response to an advisory from his suit. The boarder's headlamp blazed in Daj's face.

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A female scream overrode Kim's attempts at communication. Ms. Ankala was voicing her feelings in Arabic but no moderately intelligent human could have misunderstood the meaning of her words. The headlamp wavered to one side. In the gloom behind the light Daj could see a shadowy figure gripping the boarder's gun arm.

Daj let go of his gun. He had never practiced maneuvering in free fall but he understood the basic principles. You could only move if you could push off from a hold. You would continue moving in the same direction until you grabbed a hold and stopped yourself. You had to ignore everything your body had learned to expect.

In his mind he saw his next moves as a pair of carom shots. First he pulled on the seat and rose straight up. Then he kicked against the wall behind him and floated across the aisle.

His arms closed around the boarder's waist. His feet found a purchase on the back of Wan's couch. He pushed off and three writhing humans scraped against the ceiling.

A burst of light erupted in the back of the cabin. A beam swung across the boarder's helmet. A shadowy contorted face raged at him through the boarder's visor. The contact between the two suits conducted the muffled sound of an angry voice telling him he was acting like a fool if he didn't let go.

A strange cold feeling spread up his left leg. More cold feelings spread from his right shoulder and the small of his back. His fingers went limp. The light in the cabin disappeared down a long tunnel.

To Ms. Ankala, Daj was a hero who deserved all the praise she could give him. "The gun was pointed right at me," Ms. Ankala told the first newsy who interviewed her. "I might not be talking to you if the boy hadn't fired. Then he came across the aisle and helped me hold on until the rescue party broke in. He held on right up to the moment the anesthetics from the rescue party took effect."

Father Hong had more ambivalent feelings. "That wasn't self defense, Daj."

"He was pointing his gun at her," Daj said. "He was in a perfect position to take her hostage. The boarding party would have come in and found themselves looking at a hostage situation."

The newsies wanted to know what Mother Cam and Sergeant Song thought about Colonel Mungveli's decision. Did they think Colonel Mungveli did the right thing when he decided to free the civilian hostages by force? And put their children in danger? Ms. Ankala's statements seemed to indicate Yin Daj could have been killed. Did Major Yin feel the results justified that kind of risk?

"I'm certain Colonel Mungveli made the best decision he could," Mother Cam said. "There's no such thing as a perfect decision when you're dealing with violent situations. You can make the best decision possible and still have things go wrong."

"Are you speaking as a mother or an officer, Major Yin?"

"I've said all I have to say. Thank you."

She said the same thing when she called Daj four days after the rescue operation. Colonel Mungveli had landed reinforcements as soon as he had been certain the hostages were safe, but he had left her in charge of the defense of the docking port. Then he had given her a bigger command when the Secretariat had ordered a full-scale pacification operation.

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"There's no way I can second-guess your decision," Mother Cam said. "I can't bring myself to tell you I approve of it, however. I'm afraid I might be encouraging you to take more risks."

"I understand," Daj said.

"I might feel differently if I weren't your mother."

Daj nodded. They stared at each other across the distance that separated them. He had returned to his room in Sergeant Wei Base and she was calling from an office in Huanying City.

A strange look passed across her face. He had never seen her look at him that way—and yet, somehow, it seemed familiar.

"You're a good boy, Daj. I don't know if you did the right thing or not. But I think you're a good boy."

Daj swallowed. They stared at each other again. "Give your father a hug for me," Mother Cam said.

"Yes, ma'am."

Colonel Mungveli decided the memorial service for Lieutenant Kim should be held in the main square of Huanying City two days after the pacification force got the situation under control. Kim had been the only fatal casualty. Fifteen people had been seriously wounded in the pacification operation but they had received immediate medical care. Kim's suit had been slashed with a knife just before the rescue force had entered the cabin. There had been nothing anyone could do for him.

It was a standard Brigade ceremony. The bagpipes played a slow march. Kim's name was ceremonially transmitted to the roll of honor maintained at Hammarskjöld. Seven ceremonial powder rifles fired three noisy volleys.

The five hostages had been given a special place in the front of the spectators' area. They arranged themselves in a neat little formation, with Father Hong on the right and the two children in front. Daj had hoped they would be asked to participate in the ceremony. He wanted to stand at attention beside the honor guard or do something else that would express his feelings about the way Lieutenant Kim had behaved in his last moments. Kim hadn't been the brightest officer the Brigade had ever commissioned, but, in the end, he had done everything that a soldier was supposed to do: he had made the Heavenlies focus on him and given the rescue party time to enter the vehicle.

Daj had told Father Hong he wanted to participate in the ceremony and his father had assured him it wasn't possible. They would stand where they were supposed to, Father Hong had said. In the place Colonel Mungveli had assigned them.

They were, after all, civilians. ○

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THE NEED OF HER FLESH

he was the one
to father her children
his scent clouds of love
her perfume drew him

as he embraced her, she nibbled his neck
which tasted fine, so when they joined
she took a bite, another, another
helpless with love
he kept going, kept making
suicide love
while she ate his head
he didn't know
didn't need to be told
he was the one
he would father her children

he tasted so fine
she kept on eating
his body kept going
after his head was gone
and she began laying

sated only
after munching his thorax
his wings and legs
being too chitinous

to nourish her children
she needed his flesh

she loved him till death

—Mary A. Turzillo

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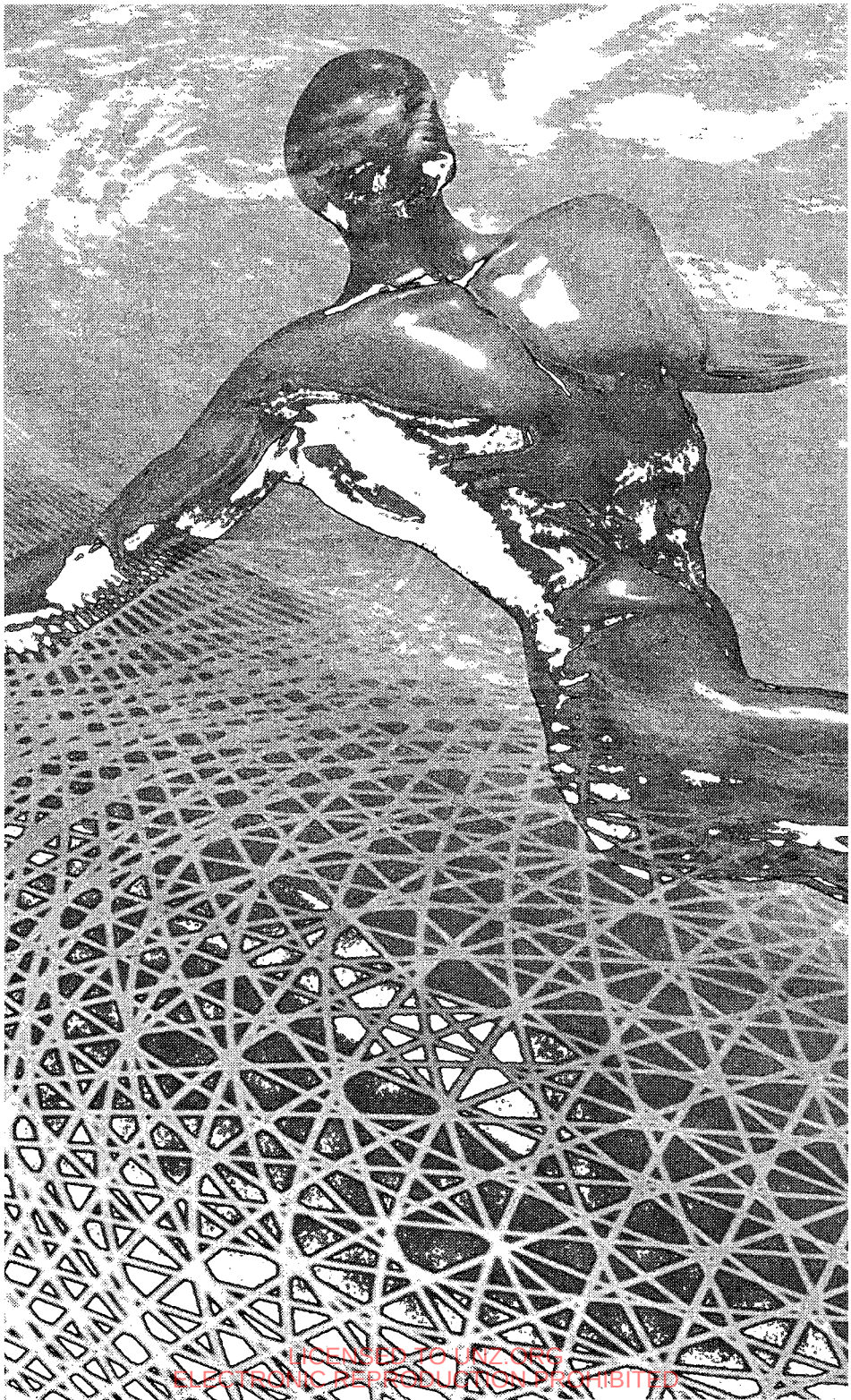

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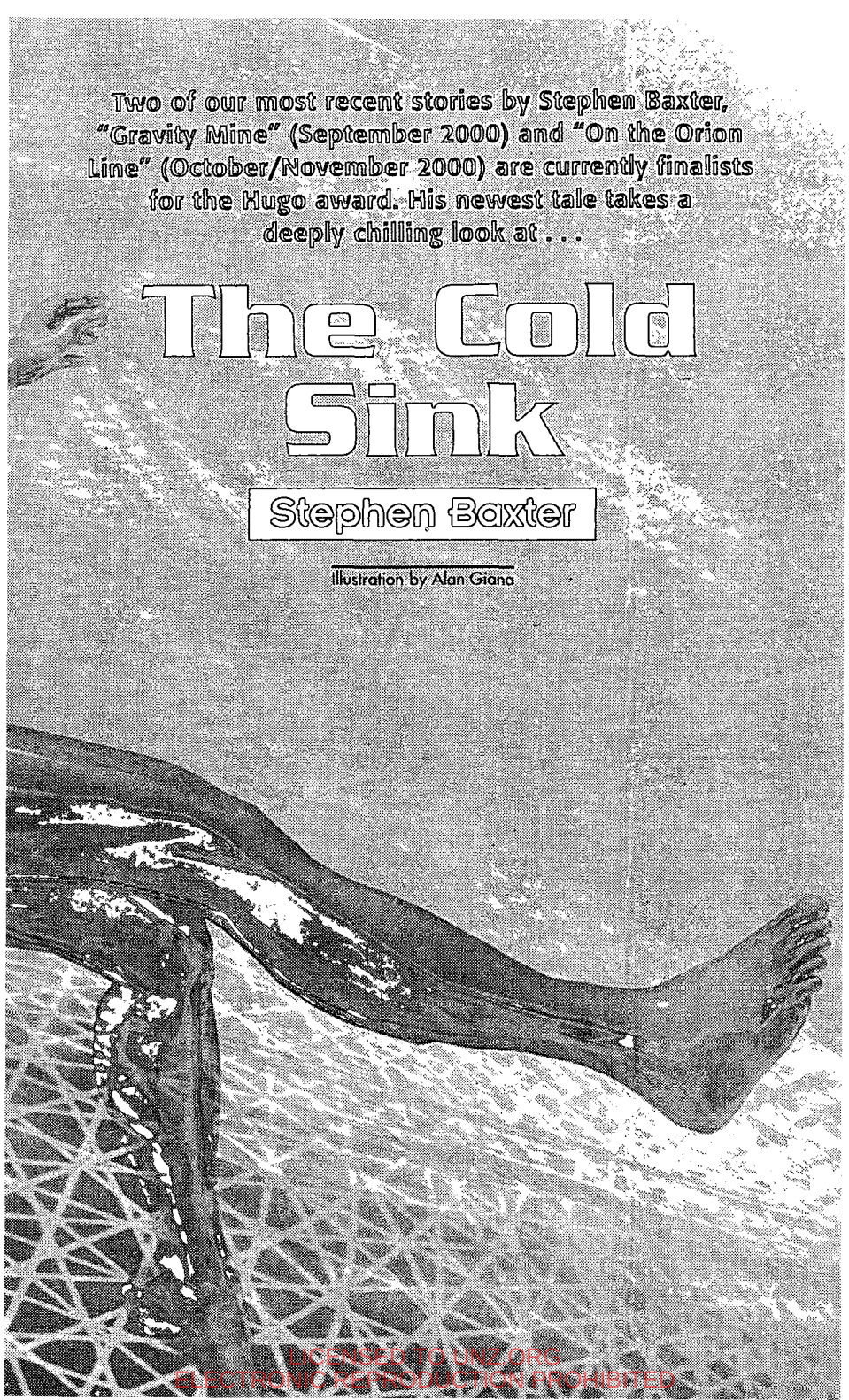
Two of our most recent stories by Stephen Baxter, "Gravity Mine" (September 2000) and "On the Orion Line" (October/November 2000) are currently finalists for the Hugo award. His newest tale takes a deeply chilling look at . . .

The Cold Sink

Stephen Baxter

Illustration by Alan Giana



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I called on Jack Raoul at the time appointed by the Interim Coalition of Governance, acting in its capacity of Supreme Court of the Third Expansion. Raoul submitted himself to my custody without complaint or protest. I must record that the indignity of the armed escort, as ordered by the court, only added to the cruelty of the procedure.

It was as if somebody had called his name.

He was alone in his Virtual apartment—drinking whiskey, looking out at a fake view of the New Bronx, missing his ex-wife—alone in a home become a jail, in fact. Now he looked to the door.

Maybe they'd come to get him already. He felt his remote heart beat, and his mood of gloomy nostalgia gave way to hard fear.

Don't let 'em see they've won, Jack.

With a growl, he got to his feet, stalked across the worn carpet, and commanded the door to open.

And there, instead of the surgeons and Commission goons he had expected, was a Silver Ghost: a spinning, shimmering bauble as tall as Raoul, crowding the dowdy apartment-block corridor—intimidating so close to, like some huge piece of machinery. In its mirrored epidermis he could see his own gaunt Virtual face.

An electromagnetic signature was quickly overlaid for him—Ghosts looked alike only in normal human vision—but he would have recognized his visitor anyhow.

"*You,*" he said.

"Hello, Jack Raoul."

It was the Ghost known to humans as the Ambassador to the Heat Sink.

"What are you doing here? How did you get past the Commission security. . . ? Ambassador, I'm afraid I'm not much use to you any more."

"Jack Raoul, I am here for you."

Raoul grimaced. What in Lethe did that mean? "Look, I don't know how closely you've been following human politics. This isn't a good day for me—"

"As in former times, you hide your emotions behind weak jokes."

"They're the best jokes I've got," he said defensively.

"The truth is well known. Today you must face the sentence of your conspecifics."

"So you're here for the spectacle?"

The Ghost said, "I am here to present another option, Jack Raoul."

Raoul studied the Ghost's bland, shimmering surface. There was no hope for him, of course. But he felt oddly touched. "You'd better come in."

The Ambassador sailed easily into the apartment, making the walls crumble to pixels where its limbs brushed against them. "How is the whiskey today?"

"Getting there." Raoul sipped it, savoring its peaty smoke. "You know, I'm all but two hundred years old. But I figure that I could live another two hundred and still not get this stuff right." Still, maybe this would be his lasting legacy, he thought sourly: the best Virtual whiskey in all the Third Expansion, savored and remembered long after the Raoul Accords had been forgotten—which time might not be so far into the future.

"You are missing Eve," said the Ambassador.

The Ghost's sudden perception that always surprised him. "Yeah," he admitted. "In a way this place is all I have left of her. But even here she is just an absence."

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"You must leave here now," said the Ghost.

The abruptness of that startled him. "Leave? How? Where are we going?"

"Jack Raoul, do you trust me?"

Escape was impossible, of course; Coalition security was tight, the Commission omnipresent. But this lunatic Ghost must have come a long way for this stunt, whatever it was. Maybe it was only respectful to go along for the ride.

Anyhow, what did he have to lose? One last adventure, Jack: why not?

He put the whiskey glass down on a low table, savoring the weight of the heavy crystal, the gentle clink of its base on the table. "Yes," he said, looking into his heart. "Yes, I guess I do trust you." He stood straight. "I'm ready."

Again he had the sensation that somebody was calling his name.

The room crumbled into blocky pixels that washed away like spindrift, and suddenly he was suspended in light.

It is important to understand that Raoul's fully human brain was maintained by normal physiological functions.

Think of him as a human being, then, flensed and de-boned, sustained within a shell of alien artifice.

The operation was more like a dismantling than a medical procedure. It proceeded rapidly.

Immediately afterward I observed Raoul's eyes.

The lids worked in irregularly rhythmic contractions for about five or six seconds. Then the spasmodic movements ceased. The face relaxed, the lids half-closed on the eyeballs, leaving only the white of the conjunctiva visible. (It will be recalled that Raoul's "eyes" were quasi-organic Ghost artifacts.)

I called in a sharp voice: "Jack Raoul!" I saw the eyelids lift up, without any spasmodic contractions.

Raoul's eyes fixed themselves on mine.

Raoul looked down at himself. His body gleamed, a silver statue.

He peered around, seeking orientation. He made out a tangle of silvery rope, a complex, multi-layered webbing that appeared to stretch around him in all directions. Everywhere he looked, Ghosts slid along the cables like droplets of mercury.

And beyond and through it all, a deep glimmering light shone, a universal glow made pearl grey by the depth of the tangle.

He sure wasn't on 51 Pegasi I-C anymore.

Jack Raoul had spent his working life at the uneasy political interface between Ghost and human. In those vanished days of more or less friendly rivalry, governed by more or less equable accords, it had been Raoul's responsibilities to ensure that humans knew what the Ghosts were doing, on their vast, remote experimental sites, just as Ghost observers were allowed to inspect human establishments.

Mutual security through inspection and verification. An old principle.

Raoul had soon learned that asking wasn't enough. Somebody had to go out there and see for himself—and on Ghost terms. That meant a sacrifice, though, that nobody was prepared to accept.

Nobody but Raoul himself.

So his brain and spinal cord were rolled up and moved into a cleaned-out chest cavity. His circulatory system was wrapped into a complex mass

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around the brain pan. The Ghosts built a new metabolic system, far more efficient than the old and capable of working off direct radiative input. New eyes, capable of working in spectral regions well beyond the human range, were bolted into his skull; and he was given Ghost "muscles"—a tiny anti-gravity drive and compact actuator motors.

At last he was wrapped in something that looked like sheets of mercury.

Thus he was made a Ghost.

Jack Raoul couldn't live with people anymore, outside of Virtual environments. Not that he wanted to. But he could fly in space. He could eat sunlight and survive the vacuum for days at a time, sustaining his antique human core in warmth and darkness.

It was odd that he was actually more at home here in a Ghost ship than anywhere in the human Expansion.

". . . Jack Raoul." The Sink Ambassador swam before him, spinning languidly. "How do you feel?"

Raoul flexed his metal fingers. "How do you think I feel?"

"You are as evasive as ever."

"Am I on a ship, Ambassador?" If so it was bigger than any Ghost cruiser he had ever seen.

"In a manner of speaking. For now, we must ascend."

"Ascend?"

"Toward the light. Please." The Ghost rose, slow waves crossing its surface.

Effortlessly Raoul followed.

Soon they were passing into the tangle of silvery ropes. When he looked back, there was nothing to mark the place he had emerged from—not even a hollow in the tangle.

At home or not, he knew he shouldn't be here.

"Ambassador, I was under house arrest. How did you get me out of there?"

"Have you improved your understanding of quantum physics since we last met?"

Inwardly, Raoul groaned.

The Ambassador began, somewhat earnestly, to describe how the Ghosts had learned to break up electrons: to divide indivisible particles.

"The principle is simple," said the Ghost. "An electron's quantum wave function describes the probability of finding it at any particular location. In its lowest energy state, the wave function is spherical. But in its next highest energy state the wave function has a dumbbell shape. Now, if that dumbbell could be stretched and pinched, could it be divided. . . ?"

The Ambassador described how a vat of liquid helium was bathed in laser light of a precise frequency, exciting the wave functions to their dumbbell configurations. Then, as the pressure within the helium was increased, the dumbbell split and the two half-bubbles drifted apart.

To Raoul it sounded like a typical Ghost experiment: extremes of low temperature, the fringe areas of physical law.

"Jack Raoul, you must understand that the quantum wave function is no mathematical abstraction, but a physical entity. *We have split and trapped a wave function itself*—perhaps the first time in the history of the universe this has occurred," the Ghost said immodestly.

Raoul suppressed a sigh. "You guys never do anything simply, do you? So you split an electron's wave function. So what?"

"The half-electrons, coming from the same source, are forever entangled.

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Put another way, if the bubbles are separated and the wave function collapsed, an electron can leap from one bubble to another. . . ."

Raoul fought his way through that fog of words. "Oh," he said. "Teleportation. You're talking about a new kind of teleportation. Right? And that's what you used to get me out of my cell."

"Yes. Time was short, Jack Raoul. Your conspecifics were closing. . . ."

So they were, and so they had been for decades.

Still they rose through the crowded tangle. That all-consuming light seemed, if anything, to be growing brighter. He could sense deep vibrations passing through the structure, the booming low-frequency calls of Silver Ghosts. Here and there he saw denser concentrations—nurseries, perhaps, or control centers, or simply areas where Ghosts lived and played—little more than patches of silvery shadow, like birds' nests in the branches of some vast tree. It was characteristic Ghost architecture, vibrant, complex, beautiful, alive—and utterly inhuman.

To understand Ghosts—so Raoul used to lecture those who were skeptical about the mission that had consumed his life—you had to understand where they came from.

The world of the Silver Ghosts was once Earthlike: blue skies, a yellow sun. As the Ghosts climbed to awareness their sun evaporated, killed by a pulsar companion. The oceans froze; there was frantic evolutionary pressure to find ways to keep warm. Then the atmosphere started snowing.

The Ghosts, watching their life heat leak away to the sky—which they called the Heat Sink—refused to die.

The evolution of the Ghosts had since been quite different from mankind's. The Ghosts had become symbiotic creatures, derived from life forms that huddled into cooperative collectives as their world turned cold. And they seemed to be motivated—not by expansion and the acquisition of territory for its own sake, as humans were—but by a desire to understand the fine-tuning of the universe. As if they wanted to fix the design flaws that had betrayed them.

It had seemed to Jack Raoul that humans and Ghosts were different enough that everybody could get along. His quasi-official efforts at liaison between the species had coalesced into the patchwork of treaties eventually known as the Raoul Accords.

But times changed.

When Raoul was a boy, the human colonization program was still piecemeal, driven by individual initiative. But gradually the Druz Coalition—and its executive arm the Commission for Historical Truth—had infiltrated all mankind's power centers.

The Druz ideologues had provided the species with a unity of purpose, belief, even language. The Third Expansion became a powerful engine of conquest.

But from Jack Raoul's point of view, it was all downside.

The pro-human ideology got ferocious. Soon even longevity, like Raoul's, was seen as a crime against the interests of the species. As the short generations had ticked by, and as the worlds of humanity filled up with fifteen-year-old soldiers, Raoul had come to feel like a monument, left standing from an earlier, misunderstood era.

And it got worse.

Raoul had been summoned back to Earth, to appear before the Commission for Historical Truth. It was part of the great cleansing that had been

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pursued ever since the days after the fall of the Qax Occupation of Earth, when collaborators had been hunted down and judged.

After a curt hearing, Raoul's life's work had been retrospectively labeled as counter to the evolutionary interests of mankind.

His advisers had urged him to appeal. Everything he had done had been under the specific direction of legally constituted governments and intergovernmental bodies of the time.

But he wasn't about to justify himself to a bunch of children. He knew the true value of his legacy. After all, it had cost him his own humanity.

And so sentence had been passed.

". . . How did we get to be the bad guys, Ambassador?

The Ambassador's perfect hide cast glimmering highlights from the tangle sliding past them. "We are old, Jack Raoul. Old and out of our time."

"That we are, my friend."

"Nevertheless, Jack Raoul, you have been a valuable interface between our species. Many sentient beings were saved from unhappiness and premature termination by your actions. This 'punishment' is absurd and disproportionate. It is probably not even legal in your own terms."

"You're storing up trouble," Raoul said. "Like it or not, I was tried by humanity's highest court. If you intervene it will surely go badly for you. . . . And the Commission for Historical Truth is not noted for its forgiveness. As for me, maybe it's my duty to sit tight and take my punishment. Perhaps I will be the greater martyr for it."

"See what we offer you, Jack Raoul, before you turn it down."

At last, Raoul saw, their steady rise was slowing, the tangle of silver cables thinning out, as if they were reaching the top of a vast metallic tree. But there was still no sign of black, star-studded sky above; rather he made out swathes of light, glowing brightly, bright as the sun. Maybe the ship was actually sailing through the outer layers of a sun; it wouldn't be the first time the Ghosts had pulled such a stunt.

But the light, so his smart eyes quickly told him, was too complex for that. It was as if the sky was crowded with stars, every place he looked.

And suddenly he understood. *Olbers' paradox* . . .

"Sink Ambassador. This teleportation technique of yours. It can carry you from one side of the universe to the other. Yes?"

"Further than that."

"And the light that bathes us—"

"It is starlight, Jack Raoul. Nothing but starlight."

Again he had the sense that someone called him. He ascended into the light, seeking the voice.

After several seconds the eyelids closed again, slowly and evenly, and the eyes took on the same appearance as before.

I called out again.

Once more, without any spasm, the lids lifted. Undeniably living eyes fixed themselves on mine with perhaps even more penetration than the first time. Then there was a further closing of the eyelids, but now less complete.

He looked down at the Ghost ship, a mass of entwined silvery cables with knots of life embedded everywhere, all of it glowing in the endless starlight. He could still make out the Sink Ambassador, a mercury droplet clinging to the tangle.

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But the structure was shrinking, closing on itself. The sky was a sphere of light, glowing white, and he felt he was being drawn away from the tangle, up into the light.

"Olbers' paradox," he whispered.

"Yes," said the Ghost. "A key moment in the evolution of human thought, a philosophical fossil preserved by exiles through the Qax Extirpation. . . . If the universe were infinite and static, every line of sight would meet the surface of a star, and the whole sky would be as bright as the surface of a sun. Even occluding dust clouds would soon become as hot as the stars themselves. That was evidently not so, for those observers of old Earth. Therefore their universe could not be infinite or static."

"But here—"

"But here, things are different. This appears to be a pocket universe, Jack Raoul—we think, a bubble of spacetime pinched off by a singularity. The heart of a black hole, perhaps—"

"Infinite and static."

"Yes."

"It doesn't make sense," Raoul said. "If the whole sky is as hot as the surface of the sun—Ambassador, how do you keep cool?"

The Ghost rolled, shimmering. "There is another pocket universe at the center of the colony. Our heat is dumped there."

Raoul gaped. "You have a *whole universe* for a heat dump? And is that how the stars keep shining?"

"We think so. Otherwise, immersed in this heat bath, simple thermodynamics would soon cause the stars to evaporate. We have only recently arrived here, Jack Raoul; there is much we have yet to explore. But it is clear to us that this cosmos is heavily engineered."

"Engineered? Who by?"

"The Xeelee," the Ghost said.

"Ah." *The Xeelee*: the dominant baryonic life form, aloof from the petty squabbles of lesser kinds—even of sprawling, brawling humanity. The Xeelee, as remote as clouds.

"It is not certain," said the Ghost. "There are certain signatures we have come to recognize. . . . Such universe-modeling does appear to be a characteristic Xeelee strategy."

Raoul laughed, wondering. "You've found yourselves an inverted sky, Ambassador. A Cold Sink." Considering their evolutionary history, this place was like a Ghost wish-fulfillment fantasy.

"Yes. Jack Raoul, *we believe we were led here*, by the Xeelee. Perhaps they have prepared a bolt-hole of their own, in case their epochal war with the photino birds is ultimately lost."

"You see this place as a bolt-hole? What are you hiding from?"

"You," said the Ambassador.

That took him aback.

"Jack Raoul, your Expansion is already expanding exponentially. We are in your way."

"It's a big Galaxy," Raoul snapped. "It's not as if we are fighting over the same kinds of territory, or resources. Ghosts are adapted to the cold and dark, humans to deep gravity wells. There is room for all of us."

"That is true," said the Ambassador. "But irrelevant. The Expansion is fueled by ideology as much as resource acquisition—and it is not an ideology that preaches of sharing. In such a situation there can be no diplomacy.

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"There is already war. A series of flashpoints, all along the Expansion's growing border. Naturally we will use our every resource in our battle for survival, just as we did when our sun died. There will be epic battles. But the logic is against us. Our most optimistic projection is three thousand years."

"Until what?"

"Until the Silver Ghosts are extinct."

He said grimly, "I spent my life fighting against such outcomes, Ambassador. As did you. Are you telling me now it was all futile?"

"From the beginning. But there is no failure, Jack Raoul. Here we have found a sanctuary. Though the Xeelee do not intervene in the squabbles of lesser types like us, they appear to embrace diversity. *They gave us this place.* Perhaps they have prepared a haven for your kind, against the inevitable day when humanity too must decline."

But Raoul found it increasingly hard to concentrate; his attention was drawn away from the Ghost and his words, away from the tangle, up to that infinite light.

The Ghost spun on its invisible axis, this way and that. "Jack Raoul, I urge you to consider. If we are safe here, so are you. We can provide any Virtual environment you desire." The Ghost seemed to hesitate. "We can give you Eve."

Ah, Eve. . . .

You can't stay. It was as if he could hear her voice, see her pushing her fingers through her greyed hair. *You held onto me for too long. And now, this. You never could let go, Jack. But now you have to. You see that, don't you?*

He felt himself rise further. The tangle shrank beneath him, becoming lost in the light.

It's time to go, Jack.

"The Sink Ambassador is a friend," he told Eve.

"Jack Raoul?"

Sure he's a friend. That's why he's showing you what you want to see. You don't want to die a failure. But it isn't real. You know that, don't you?

Perhaps the Sink Ambassador somehow heard. "Jack Raoul, it can be as real as you desire. We have only a single moment to give you. But we can make that moment last an eternity."

"Thank you, my friend. But this isn't my place."

"Jack Raoul, please. . . ."

The tangle faded into the light. Raoul had time for a last, brief stab of regret.

Then, artificial eyes raised, he ascended into the white glow that was calling him.

I attempted a third call, but there was no further movement. The eyes finally took on the glazed look of the dead.

The whole sequence of post-excision events lasted twenty-five to thirty seconds. More precise timings are of course available in the record.

Death occurred due to separation of the brain and spinal cord, after transection of the surrounding tissues and excision of the brain from the chest cavity, which probably caused acute and possibly severe pain. Consciousness was lost due to a rapid fall of intracranial perfusion of blood. Throughout the procedure nervous connections were maintained with sensory organs, notably the "eyes," "ears," and "nose."

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As noted, Jack Raoul did not resist.

It may be that because of Raoul's unique physical condition, this "beheading" was the only available mode of execution. However I believe that my precise observations during my administration of this case demonstrate that Raoul was aware of what was happening to him even after excision, *thus casting doubt on the humaneness of the procedure.*

I will concede that I saw a certain peace, at the last, in Jack Raoul's dying eyes. It may be that somehow he found consolation, which may in turn give comfort to those who passed sentence on this complex man.

Death occurred at the time and place noted.

HAMA TINIF, Attending Physician ○

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Critics Corner — **July 10 @ 9:00 P.M. EST**

Join Paul Di Filippo, Tom Easton, and Peter Heck for their insights and a preview of today's fiction.

Lois McMaster Bujold — **July 24 @ 9:00 P.M. EST**

on *The Curse of Chalion.*

Meet Our Hugo Nominees — **August 14 @ 9:00 P.M. EST**

Catherine Asaro, Michael A. Burstein, Mike Resnick, and Kristine Kathryn Rusch.

Meet Our Hugo Nominees — **August 28 @ 9:00 P.M. EST**

Lucius Shepard, Allen Steele, and Jack Williamson.

Go to **www.scifi.com/chat** or link to the chats via our home page (**www.asimovs.com**). Chats are held in conjunction with *Analog* and the Sci-fi Channel and are moderated by *Asimov's* editor, Gardner Dozois.

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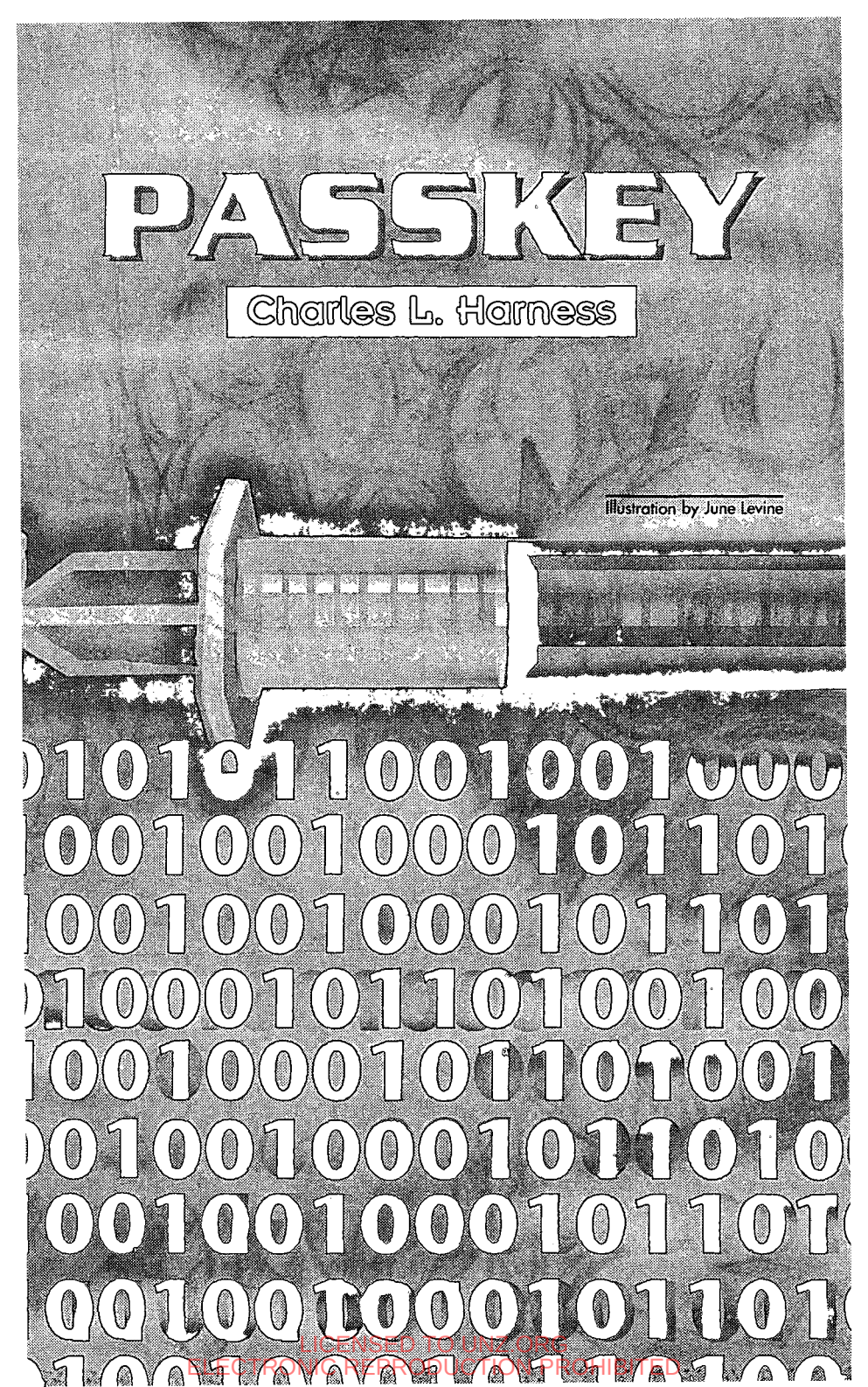
PASSKEY

Charles L. Harness



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Charles L. Harness was born in 1915 in a little town in West Texas. Although retired, he is a lawyer, accredited to practice before the Patent Office. In an SF career spanning over fifty years, he has published a dozen novels and over forty shorter pieces. Many of his stories have explored odd nooks and crannies of the law, especially patent law. His riveting new tale is a dramatic representative of this area of expertise.

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1 — The Missing Printout

The young lawyer was in his father's office when the call came in. He watched his father's face turn gray, then white. In between silences Benjamin Kelly spoke a few barely comprehensible words, then finally put the phone down. It didn't sit quite properly in the cradle. Jack Kelly reached over, adjusted it. He studied his father. A ruggedly handsome man, hair dyed black, touch of gray, swept back in a senatorial ducktail. Eyes generally friendly but intense, sheltered under bushy eyebrows. Expensive three-piece suit, carefully manicured nails. Normally erect, standing or sitting, but now he was visibly sagging.

The son waited. "Dad. . . ?"

"A fire in the record room. . . ."

"The printout?"

"If it was there, it was destroyed."

Ben Kelly had goofed . . . badly. On his last visit to the client's lab he had signed out the crucial printout, but when he had returned to the office, it wasn't in his briefcase. The senior Kelly thought he might have left it on top of a filing cabinet in Krypton Inc.'s record room. He had called. And now they had returned his call.

The printout was a single page of computer-readable binary code, and it held the client's only complete description of the invention—apparatus for the commercially feasible production of electrical energy by cold fusion. The printout described a process potentially worth billions.

The invention was now in interference in the Patent Office with an almost identical invention assigned to the United States government, as represented by the Secretary of the Department of Energy. With the printout, Krypton Inc. would probably win the interference and get the patent and make a very profitable deal with the DOE. Without it . . .

The elder Kelly's face began to pick up a little color. It went from white to a ghastly gray-pink. He said, "On the record, the printout was in my custody when it disappeared. How could I have been so stupid, to leave it there? Gross negligence!"

Jack Kelly shrugged. "Arguable." But he knew his father was right. He thought about the firm's malpractice insurance: one million tops. Kelly and Kelly, P.C., was about to vanish like a drop of water on a red hot stove. This would be the last straw. For Kelly Senior had made several other mistakes recently. . . . missed a response date in the Patent Office . . . then a hearing date . . . then a date with an inventor . . . complaints had been made . . . clients had been lost. The Committee on Enrollment was watching the old man. And now this. This could kill his father. With Jack it was different. He was young, he would survive. "I saw it once," he said thoughtfully, "The printout. A couple of months ago, when I was preparing the application."

"You remember anything, what it said?"

"Not really. Just a page of zeroes and ones. You feed it to a computer, it reads out in English text."

"I don't suppose you recall any of the zeroes and ones?"

The suggestion was too tragic for ridicule. "No, Dad." He turned his head away and got up as Kelly Senior fingered a vest pocket in an absent gesture. It was time to leave. He strongly suspected that his father's heart had been doing flip-flops during these last few moments, but that the old man wouldn't take his nitro pills with his son looking on. An innocent but foolish deceit.

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Recall? Not likely. Still, as he returned to his office, he kept thinking about the idea. He certainly did not have a photographic memory. But suppose he had? Would he then be able to recall and record a whole page of zeroes and ones? He sat down at his computer and studied the keyboard. The keys for the 1 and the 0 were widely separated. However, he thought, look at the capital letters I and O. Right next to each other. Suppose I tap them with forefinger and middle finger . . . how many strokes per minute? He timed a run. Well, about 240 strokes—bits—per minute. And how many bits on the page? Say 80 per line, 54 lines for a full page, that's a little over 4,000 bits. And at 240 bits per minute, I'd need 17 minutes to type it all out. 18, maybe.

Fascinating, he thought. He stood, looked out the window across the Plaza at the Patent Office. "I'll be over at the Office for an hour," he told his secretary as he picked up his laptop.

"Charge?" she said.

"Krypton, overhead."

Under the Patent Office Building in Crystal Plaza, Virginia, is a complete city, with restaurants, theaters, stores of all descriptions, a hospital, hairdressers, hotels, swimming pools, and for a carefully selected clientele, what are referred to by the patrons as laundries, dens, holes, shrinkers. They were special rooms, and they were expensive.

Jack Kelly headed for one such.

2 — Di-Tri

As soon as Kelly entered his appointed chamber he slipped his universal card into the credit slot, opened his laptop, took his seat, and called up the "Psych" menu. The shrinks were listed alphabetically. Adler, Brill, Freud, Fromm, Jung, Horney, Menninger, Reich, Sullivan. . . . Start with the known. He entered Freud and pulled on his VR goggles. The program kicked in instantly, and he lay, comfortable and relaxed, on the famous green velvet-covered couch, hands folded over his chest. The faint scent of cigar smoke hung in the air.

The imago of the famous bearded patriarch approached almost soundlessly on the thick Persian rug and stood beside the couch for a moment. Doctor and client exchanged brief greetings, then the psychiatrist took the plush chair behind the couch.

"So, Mr. Kelly, what sort of problem do we have today?" The consummate listener-for-hire spoke in thickly accented English.

"Well. . . ."

"Some indecision here?"

Maybe, he thought, I'd better ease into this through the back door. "Dreams . . . *Traumschau* menu, please."

"Of course."

The pulldown menu showed in the big print on the ceiling.

SEX
VICTORY
DEATH
PARADISE
MAYHEM
FRUSTRATION

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And several others.

"Try 'Frustration,'" said Kelly.

The consulting room disappeared. He was running naked in a maze. All the turns were marked, some with "0", some with "1". If he stayed in the maze he would die. But it was also very dangerous outside. They were all laughing at him. "You'll never get out."

"Oh yes I can, and I will." There's the Exit! He runs through . . . and over the cliff edge. Falling . . . falling . . . faster, faster . . . he screams. Below him he sees what looks like water, foaming, seething. He hits hard and goes under. Way under. It isn't water. He can see the actual molecules—masses, clusters, a sort of soup of two digits: 0's and 1's. He gasps and chokes. He is drowning. He tries to swim upward through the digital chaos. He will probably die.

He wakes up, heart pounding, breathing hard, sweating.

There is a long silence. Finally he is calm enough to speak. "Doctor, I think we're looking at a memory question."

"I am inclined to agree. Please proceed."

"As you know, I'm an attorney in a firm that specializes in patents. A major client is presently in litigation involving their patent on cold fusion. Our inventor had records proving very early conception and reduction to practice, good enough to win the case. Unhappily there was a fire in the client's lab yesterday and critical records were lost, including a descriptive printout that the inventor said gave a complete description of the invention. When I visited the lab some weeks ago I had occasion to see the printout. It was all in computer language—a page of zeroes and ones. I would estimate about four thousand bits, a bit being a zero or a one. Assuming that I did in fact see each and every bit, my question is, is there any way to retrieve what I saw?"

"You want to recover all those zeroes and ones, in the exact sequence in which you saw them?"

"Yes."

"On the theory that the memory stores everything the senses ever perceive? And it's there if you just know how to call it up?"

"Something like that. Well, doctor?"

"Go on," said Kelly. He noted now that the room was changing slightly. A meter-square monitor screen formed on the opposite wall. He surmised that Siggi was probably going to diagram something on it.

Dr. Freud said, "There are certain drugs that may help recall. Some are better than others . . . there may be side effects. You had organic in undergrad?"

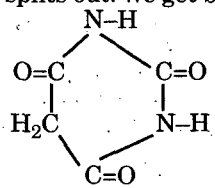
Kelly shrugged. "I majored in chemistry."

"You'll probably recognize this." A formula appeared on the wall screen:

$$H_2NC(:O)NH_2$$

"Urea," said Kelly.

"Yes. And now we'll add some diethyl malonate, and we'll warm it all up with a little sodium ethoxide, so . . . you see what happens? We get a nice condensation. Ethyl alcohol splits out. We get barbituric acid,



Not much of an acid, really. Just a little more acidic than acetic. It's the ho-

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mologs and analogs that interest us. We replace a couple of hydrogens with ethyl groups, and we have diethyl barbituric acid, better known as 'veronal,' a prescription sedative. With ethyl and phenyl groups we get Phenobarbital. Amytal is ethyl and *iso*-amyl. Allonal is *iso*-propyl and allyl. You'll recall Reich's famous patient and her famous dream pun. Allonal was her crutch for 'Al and all.' Actually, Mr. Kelly, there are over four hundred useful—*fairly* useful—urea-based derivatives. And we haven't touched the sulfur analogs yet. You've heard of Pentothal?"

"Of course."

"And you probably know that you make it with thiourea, the sulfur analog of urea. The two substituents on the ring are ethyl and methyl butyl."

"Truth serum," the young lawyer murmured. "Now we're moving in, aren't we?"

"Yes. Pentothal is also good for inducing somnolence and other things. But sometimes you get retrograde amnesia. Lately, the experts have been trying barbiturates with a couple of ring substituents in the five-position. In certain unusual situations they have achieved extremely good results with something called 'Di-tri.' The substituents are alkyl-substituted triazine rings."

"Dosage?" said Kelly.

"Arterial injection, ten milligrams dissolved in neutral plasma. Takes effect in seconds. Acute recall is achieved immediately and is maintained at high levels for up to fifteen minutes."

Kelly frowned. "I would need eighteen minutes."

"Eighteen minutes. Hmm. Not recommended, Mr. Kelly."

"Why?"

"A significant increase in dosage would be necessary."

"And that . . . is bad?"

"Possibly."

"Worst scenario?"

"Watch the screen please. From Federal Intelligence Files. This chap—call him Mr. X—had very brief access to three pages of Chinese troop dispositions. His problem was, he didn't read Chinese, and under the conditions of penetration, he couldn't carry even a non-metal camera. So, how to retrieve the pages out of his brain? They tried hypnosis, but that didn't work. Also, Pentothal and a couple of its cousins, without much success. That's when they turned him over to the Eidetic Unit. So, here is Mr. X, walking into the interrogation room."

The screen showed a well-dressed man in his early thirties, erect, with an easy, confident stride. "We blurred the face a bit to conceal identity," said Dr. Freud. "They gave him fifteen milligrams of Di-tri by arterial injection. Under the influence of the drug, Mr. X became an eidetic.

"We pick Mr. X up again about ten minutes after the injection. You see him sitting at a desk, very much like that one over there. He's got a black felt tip pen, and he's reproducing those three pages, all in Chinese pictograms. Experts said later it was a beautiful job, superb calligraphy. The agency got exactly what they wanted. But there was a problem. Here's Mr. X two hours later. He's still copying. He's copying those three pages, over and over and over. Since he was their first case with Di-tri, they let him do it. Determination of side effects was part of the study. He kept at it for hours. They ran out of paper at nine the next morning. Mr. X didn't mind. He kept going through the motions with his hands and fingers just as though the pa-

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per was there. They took him to Georgetown Hospital. He died the next day. They are still not sure what of, but the certificate calls it cardiac arrest. The autopsy was interesting. They were able to get slices of prefrontal lobe, left hemisphere. This is what they found."

An arrow pointed to an area on the screen, and the thickly accented voice continued. "Neurons, Mr. Kelly, magnification about eight hundred. The human brain has about one hundred billion. The neuron has one long tentacle, its axon, and lots of smaller ones, its dendrites. Normal cerebral neurons don't actually touch, though they come close. The synaptic gap is normally only a few billionths of an inch. The axons are terminated by synaptic knobs. These release neurotransmitters to dendrites of adjacent cells, where the transmitters are picked up on receptor sites. This passes an electrical charge to the recipient cell. But note the difference here. Mr. X's neurons not only touch, his dendrites are totally entangled. There are no gaps, no need for neurotransmitters. These cells are hard-wired, such as you'd find in a computer with ROM. In the hours before his death, Mr. X could do that one thing with superlative efficiency, but that's all he could do. The extra five milligrams killed him. Nowadays, if the asset is to be preserved, they never use more than ten."

Kelly thought about that. "With adequate mental input I think twelve point five mg would give me my eighteen minutes. What's the probability I could survive twelve point five?"

"Fuzzy logic?"

"If that's the best you can do."

"I'd say, somewhere between possible and probable."

"I'll take it."

"Mr. Kelly, why would you risk your sanity, perhaps even your life, for this litigation?"

"It's . . . the firm, Sigmund. You would have to be there."

"The hell you say. It's your father, isn't it? If you really want to be useful to your father, stay alive and healthy. You die, or go crazy, so will he. Anyhow, he'll never let you do it."

"Wrong, doctor. He'll never know. All he'll see is a neat maneuver to save the firm."

"Then—the judge won't let you. . ." The sentence faded into a question.

"A chance I'll have to take."

"Have you considered all your options? There's always bankruptcy. You'd keep the house, car, a modest bank account."

"The humiliation would kill him."

"I see." A smoke ring floated lazily over the couch, lingered a moment, then disappeared. "Since you are risking your sanity, and perhaps even your life, I insist that you have a second opinion."

"Fair enough. Carl Jung, please."

The figure of Sigmund Freud faded away; in its place another figure stood, not quite as tall, with a kindly round face, tiny mustache. "This time Freud's right, Mr. Kelly. Di-tri? Die trying, you mean. We confirm. But since you persist in your folly, I would add one thing: at the end, you must stop. Full stop, no run-on. Then you must make a strong deliberate effort to come back into full consciousness."

"Gotcha," said Kelly. The Swiss psychiatrist vanished.

Kelly removed his goggles. The room dissolved. There was a brief delay, then a slip of paper issued from the printer. A disembodied voice said. "This

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is your prescription. You can get it filled in the pharmacy around the corner. Twelve point five milligrams in a sealed pre-loaded syringe, sterile. Don't remove the cap until just prior to injection. Have you made your will?"

"Go to hell." Kelly got up, stretched, retrieved his laptop and walked out.

3 — The Petition

"I need to get on the witness stand," Jack told his father. "If I can get eighteen uninterrupted minutes on the stand, I think I can pull that entire page of binary out of memory."

"You can do that?"

"I think so. I believe I can feed the product into a compiler, and print out an English language text. If we can do that, and get it admitted into evidence, we win."

"You'd need someone able to waive the rules, someone in ultimate authority heading the Board panel. You'd probably need the commissioner himself. Son, that's impossible, and you know it. The manual says three examiners-in-chief make up the panel. No mention of the commissioner. I don't think an actual living breathing commissioner has presided over an actual hearing within the last fifty years.

"Seventy-seven. I looked it up. But we still have a chance. We use their own rules. Rule 352 says oral hearings may be held at the discretion of the commissioner. He can jolly well be there, if he takes the notion. And how about Rule 183? Suspension of the Rules . . . 'any requirement of the regulations which is not a requirement of the statutes may be suspended or waived by the commissioner.' Hey?"

The older man stared at his son. "Okay, okay. I'll fax over a petition." He was thoughtful. "Let's see, now. Ah, yes. 'The presence of the commissioner in person is believed required to prevent the miscarriage of justice. . . .' But just be prepared for a big disappointment."

4 — The Commissioner

The Honorable Douglas Martin, Acting Commissioner of Patents, kept on his credenza a framed partly punched New Haven commuter card for the month of July, 2057. This card was his own private secret, a mystery to the Patent Office staff. He had read somewhere about an austere order of nuns who carried a miniature plastic human skull in an inner pocket, to remind them that, no matter how bad things got in this life, things *could* be worse.

He thought back. The Darien 7:15, rarely on time, but never late when you needed it to be late. He had once remarked to his bridge group, if he owned both hell and the New Haven, he would live in hell and rent out the New Haven.

He thought back to last year and the two-hour commute from Connecticut to his office in the law firm in lower Manhattan. He thought back to hundred-hour weeks, and to the near destruction of his family. He recalled his last trial, and he winced. An adverse witness had convinced a sympathetic jury that she could recall every telephone number on a long list that she had seen but once. The last straw.

But then Fate had smiled. Or maybe snickered. A high administrative of-

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fice in the United States Patent Office had fallen vacant: Deputy Commissioner of Patents. You'll love it, they told him. They're a bunch of engineers. With them everything is cold logic. Black and white. No ambiguous memory stuff. So he had pulled some political strings and he had got it. Commute by metro from his new home in Virginia—twenty-six minutes. And that included a ten-minute drive to the station.

And now, some twelve months later, he picked up the little framed reminder of past horrors, and was thoughtful. The former commissioner had resigned, so at least for the time being, he, Douglas Martin, was acting commissioner, and he had moved into the spacious office of the departed official. The Commissioner's Law Library was next door. He had looked around. Shelf after shelf of dust-gathering buckram-bound *Commissioner's Decisions*. Cite as "C.D." No longer published.

Ah, he thought, the commissioners were giants in those days. No longer. Today they don't decide anything. They have other duties, mostly involving foreign functionaries and not much fun. A commissioner's routine lacked sauce and savor.

In another few months the administration would change. A new commissioner would be appointed, and would bring in his own henchmen. Before that, Douglas Martin wanted to get his name on a case. He wanted to write a genuine Commissioner's Decision—as they did in the old days.

And this might prove difficult. For he was insulated from the actual business of his office, almost a figurehead, like a Byzantine sultan, where affairs of state were conducted by career viziers and courtiers. He seemed to have no control on whether a certain patent was granted or not granted. His office got an average of 2.4 petitions to the commissioner per working week, but he never saw any of them. Nor did his two assistant commissioners. All Petitions-to-the-Commissioner were funneled to the examiners-in-chief, experts in whatever field the case referred to. It all made for efficient operation of the Office. On the other hand, before he left this place, he'd like to say that he had presided over the fate of at least one patent.

He buzzed his first secretary. "Ms. Stabler, what's on the Petition Docket?"

"The. . . ?

"Petition Docket. The list. Anything?"

"Oh, of course. Yes. There. Just one, today. I'm forwarding."

He peered at his monitor. "Interference. Waterman v. Pindell. Cold fusion." Interesting. "Send the file up, Ms. Stabler. I'll head the panel for that one." His own genuine C.D.!

There was a long silence. He realized he had shocked her. This must be a historical first for Ms. Stabler. It was like Louis the Fourteenth telling his corps of valets, run along boys, I'll dress myself.

"Yes sir." It was a barely controlled gulp.

At nine o'clock the next morning the commissioner's buzzer sounded and Ms. Stabler's soft modulated voice floated in over the intercom. "The interference group is in the hearing room."

5 — Passkey

Geometrically the hearing room was a miniature courtroom, with lecterns on a dais for the three members of the trial board, tables with computer con-

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soles for the two opposing parties and their exhibits, a chair for the witnesses, and a court reporter. All rose as Martin entered. He exchanged pleasant nods with the contestants, smiled briefly at the court reporter, then took the chair between the two examiners-in-chief, Halpern and Levitt. He knew them to be solid career men and that they had presided over dozens of hearings such as this one. They looked wise, able, competent . . . and puzzled. (Why was *he* here?)

Commissioner Martin smiled and looked out over the group. "Good morning, gentlemen. Please be seated. Shall we start with representations? Junior party?"

The elder Kelly stood. He intoned gravely, "Ben Kelly for the Party Waterman, Mr. Commissioner."

"Thank you, Mr. Kelly."

Opposing counsel rose as Ben Kelly took his seat. "J. Digby Vinson for the Party Pindell, Mr. Commissioner."

"Thank you, Mr. Vinson." He could tell at a glance that the others were lawyers, probably junior associates. No inventors here. None of their affair. They would just be confused. Strictly a legal battlefield!

Martin continued. "I have read both file wrappers in this interference. The party Waterman, represented by Mr. Kelly, filed after the party Pindell, and is therefore the junior party, and to prevail must prove inventorship prior to that alleged by the senior party, Pindell. In this respect I understand that we will hear from Mr. Jack Kelly. However, before we get into that, and for the better understanding of the Board, I now ask that Mr. Ben Kelly give us a brief description of Dr. Waterman's invention. Mr. Kelly?"

"Certainly, Mr. Commissioner." He stood and began reading from the paper Jack had given him. "The invention involves what is commonly referred to as 'cold fusion.' The name is a misnomer. Particles of matter that normally repel each other are forced together under conditions of intense heat, heat ordinarily found only in the deep interiors of stars. In Dr. Waterman's invention, under these conditions the particles are in the form of a very hot plasma. This plasma has to be held in place long enough for the nuclei to fuse. The only way to do this is to wrap it in a strong magnetic field, which again takes energy. Two variables are critical—time and plasma density. They are inversely related. In fact, for workable cold fusion, their product must be at least 10^{14}—the so-called Lawson criterion. All this is history. It didn't work because—until this invention—nobody knew how to keep the plasma hot enough long enough for it to fuse and continue in a controlled chain fusion. Dr. Waterman changed that by adding a second source of heat—an array of laser beams. It's of course old to use lasers as the sole source of heat for cold fusion. The hydrogen fuel pellet implodes nicely. But with lasers alone, when the calories are counted, more go in than come out, with a negative heat balance. However, with this invention the heat balance is positive." He laid his notes on the table and looked over at opposing counsel. "It is my understanding that the Pindell invention is substantially identical."

Martin said, "Mr. Vinson?"

Vinson shrugged. "So stipulated."

"Opening statement, Mr. Kelly?"

"Request permission to reserve."

"Of course. Any opening statement, Mr. Vinson?"

"Just this." He stood. "Members of the Board, please bear in mind that Dr.

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Pindell filed first and is senior party in this interference. Under the law, he is presumptively the first inventor. To rebut this presumption the Party Waterman must present clear and convincing evidence that *he* is the first inventor. We do not believe he can do this. Thank you." He sat down.

"Mr. Vinson, clear up something for me," Martin said. "The plasma fuses into particles. This fusion produces a great deal of heat?"

Vinson nodded. "Yes. However, if the process is to be useful, the plasma fusion step has to produce more heat than that which went into creating the plasma. Dr. Pindell's invention accomplishes that."

"Rather like nuclear fission?"

"No, nuclear fission produces energy by splitting atomic nuclei. In fission, radioactive wastes are necessarily produced. Accidents occur—Three-Mile Island . . . Chernobyl. Because of safety concerns raised by Three-Mile Island, no new orders for nuclear plants in the United States have been placed since 1978. Dr. Pindell's cold fusion process will change all that. Cold fusion produces no radioactive byproducts or wastes."

"But don't we already have nuclear fusion?"

"So far, Mr. Commissioner, our only large scale fusion has been the hydrogen bomb. This type of fusion has such a brief and uncontrollable release that it cannot be used for the production of electric power. Cold fusion, on the other hand, can be controlled. Dr. Pindell's process can produce electric power very cheaply." Vinson waited a moment. But there were no more questions. "Thank you, gentlemen." He sat down.

Martin smiled. "And thank you, Mr. Vinson. Mr. Kelly, are you ready to proceed?"

"Thank you, Mr. Commissioner. I call my first and only witness, Mr. John Kelly."

Kelly *fils* stood, was duly sworn by the court reporter, and took the witness chair. He began slowly. "I was present in Dr. Waterman's laboratory on the morning of _____. I saw apparatus there that Dr. Waterman described as capable of cold fusion, and which matched the description just now read into the record by Mr. Benjamin Kelly. Dr. Waterman told me this same apparatus was described in detail in a one-page printout, which he showed me. I did in fact look at the page, but it was in binary digit code—all zeroes and ones, and it meant nothing to me at the time. It was our intent to feed this printout into a computer and get an English language readout as an exhibit showing conception several days prior to Pindell's earliest date. Unfortunately, the record room in the Krypton Laboratories burned last week, and the printout was lost. What I propose to do here is, retrieve it from memory and get it into printed English. I have—"

The commissioner frowned, held up a hand. "A moment, Mr. Kelly. You're talking here of a full page of binary code just zeroes and ones? American Standard Code for Information Interchange—ASCII?"

"Yes, sir. And incidentally, 'ASCII' rhymes with 'passkey.'"

"Passkey. Ah. And how many bits, total, would that be?"

"About four thousand."

"And you propose to pull this out of your brain and into a word-record here and now?"

"With the Board's permission I do."

"Explain."

"Thank you. As I recall each bit I type the result on two adjacent keys on this computer keyboard: one key for the index finger for a one—actually a

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capital 'I', the other key for the middle finger, for a zero—actually a capital 'O'. Readout proceeds in stages. In the first stage I key the strings of zeroes and ones to the split-screen monitors sitting on your respective lecterns. The literal zeroes and ones show on the left screen, the English words on the right. For example, in ASCII OIOOOOOI is 'A', OIOOOOIO is 'B', and so on. This information is simultaneously fed to your printers, which print out the binary data in the left-hand column and the English translation on the right. All inputs and outputs are permanently recorded."

"How long will this take?" the commissioner asked.

"I figure to type about 250 bits a minute, so I'll need eighteen uninterrupted minutes for the recall."

Vinson shook his head and laughed softly. "Objection, Mr. Commissioner. This is just silly theatrics. If he wants to do this, he can do it in the privacy of his own office."

"Good point, Mr. Vinson." The commissioner looked over at Kelly *père*. "Why do it here, Mr. Kelly?"

"Because if I simply brought it in, and said here's what my son John remembers, I think I'd face a certain amount of justifiable incredulity. But here—if it works—everyone can observe an authentic exhibition of memory."

Vinson sniffed. "I still object. Suppose Dr. Waterman handed John a script yesterday and he memorized it?"

The commissioner gave the opposition lawyer a hard look. "Mr. Vinson, are you accusing Mr. Kelly of perjury before he even testifies?"

"Oh, no, of course not. I just meant, well, it seems to me there's something . . . most unusual . . . going on."

John Kelly said mildly, "I'm afraid it becomes even more unusual. Before I start recall, I will take a memory drug."

Vinson groaned. "More theatrics! Now he caps his testimony with a drug injection. Look at him! He is actually waving the needle in our faces! He *flaunts* it. *Drugs!* Benjamin Kelly was on his feet. "Mr. Commissioner, I anticipated this, and in order to reply properly to Mr. Vinson's objection, I have researched analogous occurrences. I am ready to state, under oath, that there is at least one person in this hearing room who injects drugs. He is a diabetic. He also takes other drugs, starting with caffeine, aspirin, and Prozac in the morning. And, naming no names, a person present takes a beta-blocker for hypertension, and there's still another whose mistress takes tamoxifen to inhibit the return of breast cancer. Shall I name names?"

"Mr. Vinson?" the commissioner said quietly.

"Blackmail," muttered Vinson.

Kelly *père* showed horror. "Sir!"

"All right, all *right!*" snarled Vinson. "No names. I withdraw all objections. Just get on with it."

"Is the witness ready?" asked the commissioner.

"One more point, sir," said Ben Kelly. "As counsel for Pindell is well aware, if this memo enters evidence, it proves priority for my client. Now, I am advised on good authority that the experience under the drug involves a severe mental and physical drain. If interrupted it cannot be resumed for several weeks. In effect, it's a one-shot proposition. Under these conditions, we ask that opposing counsel be ordered to postpone objections, if any, until the end of John Kelley's recall testimony. Now, we understand that even with the order, Mr. Vinson may forget, and may, shall we say, *inadvertently* inter-

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rupt with various loud verbal objections or comments, such as, 'too long' . . . 'the whole thing is silly' . . . 'most irregular,' 'unprecedented,' and so on. Or he may find he must cough or sneeze loudly, or even fall out of his chair."

Ben Kelly took a deep breath and turned hard eyes on the three members of the board in turn. "Gentlemen, if this should happen, the Party Waterman moves that such objection and/or comment and/or gesture be accepted as proof by this Board that the Party Waterman is the prior inventor in this interference."

It was hard to decipher the expression on the commissioner's face. "Mr. Vinson?" he said softly.

The lawyer's face was very red. "Outrageous! This is insulting! I'm taking this to the Committee on Enrollment!"

"Meanwhile?"

"Oh, let it go. . . ."

"So ordered. Will the witness continue?"

John Kelly stood, removed his jacket, rolled up his left shirt sleeve, pulled the cap from the syringe, tapped the top to make sure there were no bubbles, and stuck the tip in his left bicep. He sat down again, closed his eyes, and he could see the page. Then the lines. Then the individual bits. Already, he felt terrible. He knew that his body was taking him through all phases of high anxiety: muscle tension, sweaty palms, shortness of breath, pounding heart. Then everything vanished, the room, the people, everything except zeroes and ones. In perfect order, one by one they began jumping at him, and he began tapping.

Time passed. He became gradually aware of the dimensions of infinity. But there was an end, and he was coming to it. What was important here? He had to remember! The sprinter, breaking the tape, keeps on going for a few yards. The racehorse gallops on past the finish line. But *he* was supposed to . . . *stop?* But *why?* This was *fun!* Maybe he could just go on forever and ever and ever, like Mr. X. But then they had cut his head open. . . . No! No!

STOP! He stopped. He wrenched his hand from the keyboard. He shook his head vigorously, then looked up at the faces and grinned. "Okay?" He watched his father heave an immense sigh, then wipe his blood-drained face with a wadded linen handkerchief. The little silver nitro pill capsule sat on the table in front of the lead counsel. The screwcap was not visible.

"Perfect!" Kelly Senior rumbled.

"Objection!" cried J. Digby Vinson.

"Overruled," Douglas Martin said. "Please continue, counselor."

"We have nothing further," said Benjamin Kelly. "In closing we ask that the Board please note that the memorandum, recalled under oath, proves a date earlier than in any date provable by the Party Pindell. We ask that priority be awarded the Party Waterman."

"Mr. Vinson?" said Martin.

"We stand on our filing date, Mr. Commissioner. We object to this ridiculous display of alleged mnemonics, which we ask be stricken from the record. In conclusion, we ask for summary judgment for Dr. Pindell."

"Gentlemen," Martin said, "if you will be so good as to retire to the waiting room, this Board will consider the evidence and decide the case."

He was alone with the two examiners-in-chief. "Well, what do we do with this one?"

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"I don't think you should have admitted that business with the memo," Halpern said bluntly. "I vote for Pindell."

"No precedent for that demo," Levitt said coldly. "Furthermore, I just don't plain believe it. I don't think anybody can recall a full page of zeroes and ones. I vote for Pindell. That's two to one. Shall we call them back in?"

Martin smiled. "In a moment. You know, fellows, memory is a remarkable thing. Even our routine, everyday, ordinary memory. We use it to recall phone numbers, addresses, including nine-digit zip codes. We know our social security numbers, combinations to office safes, birthdays, bank account numbers, e-mail addresses. Granted, the exact issue here appears to be one of first impression in a patent matter. However, the legal principle of recall is well established."

Halpern grunted. "But not on the scale of that memo. I still think it's impossible."

Martin frowned. In New York he hadn't believed either, and he had lost. "I disagree, Mr. Halpern. I think it may indeed be possible. There has been some interesting recent eidetic research."

"I—?"

"Eidetik. A person with a photographic memory. Total recall." There was something ironic about this. That case in New York—here it was again. But this time he was on the winning team. "The phenomenon—eidetic imagery—can occur naturally, and usually it can be controlled. It's not uncommon in children. An eidetic child can examine a page of writing in an unfamiliar language for a few seconds and then reproduce the whole thing. Leonardo da Vinci had it. He could see a face in a crowd for a few seconds and draw an accurate sketch months later. Napoleon was an outstanding example. A moment's glance at a map was sufficient for him to memorize all roads, hills, streams, bridges, everything. Felix Mendelssohn had it. He would read a score through once, then conduct the orchestra from memory. The classic example, though, was a Russian, Solomon Shereshevstii. His mind recorded indelibly everything he saw. He could forget nothing. You and I automatically forget trivia. He could not. And that meant he couldn't concentrate on essentials. He couldn't hold a regular job, and finally wound up as a professional mnemonist in a side show. An extreme case, of course, but interesting." He noted that the two panelists were exchanging glances. Not awe. No, he thought, it didn't go that far. More a mixture of surprise and sudden respect.

"But there's nothing in the rules. . . ." said Levitt.

"If there were, you'd vote for Waterman?" Martin said.

"Well, I *guess* so. . . ."

"Mr. Halpern, how about you?"

"Yeah, but so what? Nothing in the rules. . . ."

"No problem," Martin said blandly. "May I remind you of 35 U.S.C. 6: 'He—meaning *me*—may establish regulations not inconsistent with law, for the conduct of proceedings in the Patent Office.' So, there being no law against it, I hereby declare that documents recalled under oath from memory are admissible in proceedings in the Patent Office. Mr. Levitt, if you would be so kind as to prepare a Commissioner's Notice to that effect, for publication in the next *Official Gazette?*"

Levitt smiled ungrudgingly. "Of course. And in that case, Waterman."

Halpern shrugged. "Might as well make it unanimous. Waterman."

Douglas Martin grinned. A genuine C.D. and a Commissioner's Notice all in the same day!

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6 — Epilog

The Court of Appeals affirmed the Commissioner's Decision. Paul Waterman and John Kelly had a late lunch in the Federal Building cafeteria that afternoon. "Jack," Dr. Waterman said, "we want you to stay with us. But about your father . . . I don't want to hurt any feelings, but—"

"Paul, let me bring you up to date. Dad tells me he's retiring. He'll still be handling a few routine things, loose ends in the novelty field, but that's it."

"Oh. Well, give him my best."

"Sure, Paul."

Later that evening Ben Kelly was sitting in his office. Thinking. Just thinking back. Years ago. He recalled his apprenticeship in his first firm of patent lawyers. The invention had involved a pill for invisibility. He had argued for ethics, for total honesty with the client. Old Salter had straightened him out. Had the client demanded a patent that would stand up in the Supreme Court? No? A patent that covered every aspect of the invention, and damn the cost? No? Listen to me, Benny-boy. I'll tell you what he wanted. He's got a little money, okay? Maybe an inheritance from a spinster aunt. He wants to convert it into a patent, his very own prestigious patent, something he can frame, hang in the rec room, brag about in the office, in church, in the Rotary Club. So file the damn thing. Actually, it's your professional obligation. Think about it. If we don't take his money, unscrupulous lawyers probably will. So you see, it's our civic duty to help him, indeed, *encourage* him, in realizing his ambition. As long as the money lasts, anyhow.

After that, until he left to begin the partnership with his son, Ben Kelly always made the Christmas bonus list.

He filed on anything, everything. He smiled as he thought of his famous Perpetual Motion patent, with the main claim, long quoted in and out of the Office as a classic: ". . . repetitive three-dimensional position alterations." And then there was polywater: "novel hydrogen-bonding process and product." Hmm. Cancer cures, gasoline pills, rain makers . . . Old Salter gave him all the pill cases. Pill to prevent earthquakes: "A seismic modifier . . ." Pill for control of roulette wheels. Benjamin Kelly, Esq., Attorney of Record.

He sighed. Those were the days! But how about the younger Kelly? Like father like son? He didn't think so. A new generation was coming on. With the partnership—Kelly and Kelly, P.C.—it was different. Sometimes he felt puzzled. Never actually confused; no (he told himself) it was never *that* bad. But there was all this *science*. It was like driving down a street where at first everything was familiar. The old landmarks were still there. But then one by one they began to disappear. The universe, said the scientists, is expanding at a funny rate. Worse, the Big Bang is now in doubt. Protons pop in and out of existence. VR. Fuzzy logic. In the old days you thought you were merely puffing the case, innocently lying . . . but now, all too often, it turns out the invention is *true*. Like now, with *this* cold fusion. Cold fact, son Jack claims. Can this be? At Salter we used to have a dozen cold fusion cases a year. All phony. You never mentioned cold fusion in the spec. You called it something like, ". . . novel entropy-deficient mechanism for energy transformation."

In those days cold fusion cases paid the rent, perpetual motion paid the utilities, hair restorers paid the taxes. And so on. But now everything was

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changing. Next thing you know, perpetual motion: fact. Astrology: fact. Youth pills: fact. The icy clutch of science. No, it wasn't that definable. *Semi*-science. And I'm getting too old for this s__t. Time to quit. Retire. Write my book.

He heard familiar footsteps. His son was returning to the office, next door. Creaking (just a little), he got up and walked in. Kelly *fils* looked up and they both grinned. "Yeah," John said, "affirmed. Unanimous."

"I heard." Ben cleared his throat. He thought about the nearly fatal ASCII memo. He said carefully, "So—how do we stand at Krypton?"

His son replied with equal care. "Why, fine."

"But I bet he wants you to fire me?"

"Quite the contrary. Dad, they *need* you. Paul wants you to start work right away on Quintal—the next big thing beyond cold fusion. You'll get to work with parallel mainframes. You might want to brush up on your Boolean."

"Boolean. . . ."

"A bit rusty? IBM starts a ten-day refresher next week." He reached for the phone. "Let's see if we can get you in."

Ben touched the extended arm. "Uh . . . well . . . let's not rush into this. . . . Actually, you know I've been planning on getting away for a few weeks, as soon as this was over. That Caribbean cruise thing. Remember? Could you make my excuses to Paul?"

Commissioner Martin sat facing his credenza. It was all over the Office. He had looked into it. Truly, "Di-tri" was a very effective memory drug. And it could be lethal. Only a madman would use it.

He picked up the framed New Haven ticket and studied it critically. Had he made a mistake in coming here? These inventors were insane. Their lawyers were worse. Poor Vinson had not lost to logic, but to madness. Martin groaned. If he stayed, he'd become one of *them*. He thought about Connecticut and New York. Now, had that really been so awful? A rubber or two of bridge, coming in on the New Haven in the morning, not so bad, if you thought about it. And the double martini in the evening club car . . . rather nice, actually. Something to think about.

Petitioner respectfully requests reconsideration! ○

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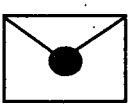

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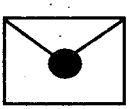

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The Infodict

James Van Pelt

Illustration by Laurie Harden

James Van Pelt lives in western Colorado with his wife, Tammy, and their three children—Dylan, Samuel, and Joshua. The author teaches English both at Fruita Monument High School and Mesa State College. His fiction publications include stories in *Analog*, *Realms of Fantasy*, and *Weird Tales*. In 1999, Mr. Van Pelt was a finalist for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer. He is currently at work on a novel. "The Infodict" is his first story to appear in *Asimov's*.

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Sanji kept a spider on Marlyss constantly, and his Concierge prompted him with updates. As Sanji was selling forty cases to the crosstown outlet, it scrolled her location to him when her car passed under a traffic vid at Divisadero and Pine.

At the moment, he was in his office, deep in his leather chair, feet up, but it wouldn't matter if he was at home or at the park or on a flight; when the info flowed, he swam in it.

Earlier in the day, he'd played back some of her phone calls. Last week she'd said, "I'd love to have dinner with you." He replayed it several times, listening to her liquidy contralto. "I'd love to . . . I'd love to . . . I'd love to . . ."

Where's she going? He wondered. Sanji called up her travel patterns for the last week, Mondays for the last month, and every fifth of the month for the year. Numbers rolled through the air between him and his desk, everything he'd gathered on her since they'd started dating a year ago. No match. He okayed the delivery to the crosstown outlet, while quick-scanning for reservations she might have made or credit blips. Nothing. He red-flagged the time for later analysis just as his Concierge reported her at Divisadero and Lombard.

"You watching Marlyss again, bud?" said Raymond. "You're obsessive." Raymond sat on the edge of Sanji's desk. As usual, his tie didn't match his shirt, and the suit coat should have been retired years ago. Rather than getting a hair implant, he had combed thin strands over the bald spot.

"Where're your specs?" Sanji snapped. "Don't you work here anymore?" Sanji minimized the Marlyss profiler, but kept the program running in the background. New numbers showing this afternoon's inventories, shipments, and condition of the delivery fleet popped up. All in the green. He stood, smoothed the front of his jacket, checked his look in the mirror. Businessman perfect. Just the right part in the hair. A meticulous, trim appearance.

"I get buzzed if there's a problem." Raymond pointed to the flesh-colored button in his ear. "I'm just a P.R. flak. Non-essential paperwork only. Short of a complete emergency, my job could be done by a high-school intern." He shrugged. "Let me take you to lunch."

Sanji's own earphone squeaked a high pitched, short-speak message about highway traffic and truck travel time. With a pressure on his desk handplate, Sanji alerted the drivers.

"I've got the expense account." Raymond said. "I'll pay." Sanji put his desk on auto mode, which handled routine calls, rerouted e-mail, and forwarded everything to the Concierge, a black, wallet-sized case attached to his belt.

Sanji checked the daily specials at Reefers, a favorite spot for the business crowd, and ordered while they walked. "What do you want?" Above them, thin clouds filtered the San Francisco afternoon, softly lighting apartment buildings and trees.

Raymond said, "Don't you ever turn that thing off? I thought I'd decide when we got there."

Sanji laughed. They wove through the lines in front of the fast-food kiosks. "You're a positive Luddite! We can have the food waiting, cooked to our specification, eat, and be out in fifteen minutes. Don't you know they hate customers like you?"

They turned down a long hill, each step jolting Sanji's specs as they flashed to him that Marlyss had used credit to park her car at a lot just off

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Divisadero and Marina Boulevard. Weather numbers scrolled up: 65 degrees, 86 percent humidity, with gusty breezes off the bay. Probably cold as hell. A list of small restaurants and shops within walking distance appeared, all in historic San Francisco, most without vid security he could tap into. He checked her med monitors. Pulse over 100 and steady. Respiration elevated. She was walking. Blood sugar a little low. Probably going to lunch herself. But why downtown? Why the change of habit? Did it mean anything about their relationship? He wouldn't know where she was until she paid for something.

Sanji ran a quick check on her infosystems. As far as he could tell, she hadn't accessed any data about him since dinner last night. Did that mean she didn't care?

"Maybe I don't know what I want yet," said Raymond

"That's the *point*. You could be deciding now. You're not a very good multitasker." Other pedestrians walked around them. Most wore specs. Many of them were working, sub-vocalizing communiqués, their eyes flitting back and forth as they read data.

Raymond was looking from building to building. Sanji knew that Raymond was interested in restored architecture. Why he didn't just access the info off the net was beyond him. Raymond actually liked to *see* the structures.

Raymond said, "So, did you ask her?"

Sanji wrinkled his brow. It was such a direct question. "Yes, last night."

"And?"

They crossed the street and entered Reefers. "Good afternoon, sirs," said the door as it opened for them. "Your table is ready."

A line shimmered on the floor, leading them into the restaurant. On the walls, outdoor footage of a rock concert surrounded them. The soundtrack was just loud enough to make other patrons' conversations unintelligible.

Sanji said, "She wants to think it over. She'll tell me tonight. I'm thirty-two. You'd think I wouldn't be so nervous."

"Thirty-two and never been married. As far as dating goes, you're practically a teenager. Thinking it over's better than a no." They sat. "Can I get a menu?" Raymond said to the table.

A minute, later a waiter, looking miffed, delivered a paper version of the day's offerings. "Are you new to Reefers, sir? We have a much more attractive electronic display tailor-made for our Concierge customers."

"You'll just have to come back, son. I left mine at work," said Raymond. The waiter's jaw dropped, and Raymond added, "You must be the new one. I've eaten here twice a week for four years."

The waiter did the peculiar, mid-focus, twitchy stare someone got when checking a readout in his specs. "Who *are* you, sir?"

Raymond smirked. "I pay cash."

"Ah, one of *those!*" said the waiter with a sniff, as if everything was clear now. He stalked away.

"Where do you *get* cash?" said Sanji.

"If you go to your bank in person, and present identification, it's still available. Mostly they keep it around for international travelers."

Sanji shook his head. This was another of Raymond's oddities. He was so consistently dependable, however, that management had decided he was eccentric rather than weird.

"But why go to the trouble?"

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The waiter appeared again, an order tablet in hand.

"I haven't decided yet," said Raymond, and the waiter turned contemptuously on his heel. "That boy isn't going to get a tip."

Sanji toyed with his napkin. Around them, others were eating their meals, their conversations lost in the projected concert's ambient noise. On the wall, a new band mounted the stage. A sea of heads stretched from the foreground to the stage's base.

Raymond said, "That's Woodstock. The 2014 one. I love the classic footage. The other night they showed the old Who concert that ended in a riot. Pretty strange to be eating shrimp in the shell while watching cops beating kids over the head with batons."

"It's the atmosphere," said Sanji. He called up the Marlyss profiler again. Her pulse was down, but he had no fresh information on her other than that she only had fifteen minutes left on her parking. The day after being asked to marry, she goes off on a strange errand. The question was, what was on her mind?

"Is it work or Marlyss now?"

Sanji snapped the display off guiltily. "How'd you know?"

"Your eyes get all spastic."

Sanji sighed. "How can you *stand* it, not being connected? Do you know where your wife is this instant? Have you checked on your children this morning?"

Raymond put the menu down. "Now that I'm ready, where's that waiter? No, I haven't checked them. I don't know how you do it. You can't eternally keep your fingers on everyone's pulse. It'll drive you crazy."

Marlyss's heart rate blinked onto the display again. The Concierge reported that it had remained unchanged for the last ten minutes. Analysis indicated she was sitting or standing, probably eating lunch. Was she alone? Something fluttered in Sanji's chest. "I have a right to all the information that's available. That's the law. What would be *crazy* would be not taking advantage of it!"

Sanji's ear plug beeped a pay-attention as new displays scrolled across the bottom of his specs. The Far Eastern division was reporting a markdown in raw material pricing. If he ordered now, he could cut 7 percent on manufacturing, invest the savings in interest-bearing bonds for an extra percent and a half. He thought for a couple of seconds about whether the numbers could drop more, decided that they might, but not much, placed the order, and shifted funds into the right accounts. In the meantime, a tiny vid window opened up in the upper left corner of his vision. The spider had found Marlyss. In the grainy picture from a bank's security camera, she walked up the street, gripping her coat closed at her neck. The breeze whipped her long, red hair in front of her face.

A quick query placed the bank a half block from her car. The Concierge listed three restaurants that were her most likely lunch spot. All touristy sea-food places. But she hadn't *paid* for anything. If she wasn't eating lunch, what was she doing there? She walked out of the first camera's view, and the Concierge switched to another camera that caught her back as she walked up the block, then out of sight around the corner.

"You're not going to make it until this afternoon, are you?" Raymond said wonderingly. "Man, you are practically comatose when you pay attention to that thing! You're an infozombie. They have twelve-step programs for your problem."

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Sanji squirmed. "You can never get enough good data. That's why all information is public. Nothing is private."

"Maybe that's okay for business activities or government policy. You're trying to read her mind. Ah, there he is."

The waiter reappeared, looking bored.

"What's the catch of the day? The menu didn't list it."

Rolling his eyes, the waiter said, "Orange Roughy."

"I'll have that, then."

Sanji leaned forward. "You don't get it. If you love someone, you want to know everything you *can*. How else will she know I care?"

"They used to call that 'stalking.'"

"That's ridiculous. Stalking is following her around. Threatening her. All I'm doing is accessing available data, which is my right. She knows I can do it—everybody does it. In fact, she probably *expects* me to. This is the information society."

"All I know is in matters of the heart, the more you know the more you don't know."

Sanji sat back. The waiter arrived, pushing a cart, their meals steaming. He put the plates in front of them. When he left, Sanji said, "What the hell does *that* mean?"

Raymond smiled, cut into the Orange Roughy. "It means that sometimes you don't want to know what's on the menu until you get there."

For the rest of the meal, they ate quietly while rock crowds cheered on the walls. Numbers rippled across Sanji's vision: delivery times, work schedules, stock prices. His ear plug whispered status reports. When he finished, he couldn't remember what he'd eaten.

At work, Sanji set a countdown clock in his specs' upper right corner. Four hours until he met Marlyss. She went home. No vids in her house, but her security alarm reported when she disarmed it, electricity consumption went up as she turned on lights, water usage indicated that she'd showered. Then, nothing. Her pulse perked along steadily. Her Concierge was in sleep mode.

He drummed his fingers on the desk, baffled. Why wasn't she checking on *him?* In the year they'd dated, she had *never* checked on him, as far as he could tell. From her point of view, their entire relationship was based on conversations and the time they'd spent together. No wonder she can't answer the question, he thought. She doesn't know me! A stomach twinge hit, and he flinched. His own med readouts indicated indigestion and suggested an antacid. He wondered what he had eaten that would cause that; he couldn't recall anything spicy. Last night had been the same though, and it wasn't food-related. He told her good night, the echo of his proposal fairly hanging in the apartment's air. Her hand rested briefly on his, her fingers warm and long and fine. "I need to think about it," she said.

After she'd gone, he'd lain in his bed, staring at the ceiling, thinking about her beside him. He rubbed his palm over the sheets on what would be her side. They were cold and smooth and empty. He tried to recapture the moment before he asked her, when the words were formed but he hadn't spoken them yet. Even now, only minutes later, he could hardly believe that he'd had the nerve to do it. Then the twinge. Stomach-acid reflux. She wasn't there, and maybe she never would be.

Now, his guts tied up again inside him, but he didn't get medicine. He put

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on his specs, activated the Concierge, started the data streaming. Green text flowing across his eyes. Quick-speak chirps in his ear. After a while, he connected the spider for Marlyss. It picked through the megamillion information strands, and soon he swam in her numbers. All of them. Medical records, shopping purchases, paychecks, tax returns, utility bills, loans, bank statements, school, everything. And the vids he'd saved. Marlyss at the mall. Marlyss in the park. Marlyss coming and going from a thousand places, all captured digitally, stored somewhere, and retrieved—by him.

But nothing anywhere to give him a clue on how she would answer his question. Sanji clenched the sheets of paper. How could the answer *not* be there? What was left to know?

His eyes grew dry watching the clock count down. He blinked and shook his head. Scrolled through jewelry catalogues, screen after screen of wedding rings. Checked travel brochures. South American beach resorts. European tour packages. What would she like? Briefly, he connected with a flower shop, then broke it off. She'd said she wanted time. Flowers would seem pushy. Or would they be romantic? What was in her head?

He fantasized about a sensor planted in everyone's brain. Readouts cunningly tailored to track emotion and thought. *That* would be information worth having! There would be no need for guesswork.

Irresistibly, with glacier-like gravity, the clock unwound the minutes.

Marlyss was waiting for him in front of the Maritime museum. In the dusk behind her, a restored schooner, attached to the dock with three permanent gangplanks, thrust its bare masts into the cloudy sky. Sanji walked quickly. The wind cut through his jacket, and he realized that he hadn't been near the sea in months. She'd suggested Fisherman's Wharf for their rendezvous. "I like the seagulls," she'd said.

He'd correlated seagulls to her database, and found that she'd papered the first apartment she'd rented, years before they met, in Seascape Serenity, a pattern of lighthouses, chambered nautiluses, and seagulls.

"I missed you," he said as they hugged, and he regretted the words immediately. It'd only been a day. He sounded needy.

"Me too." She held his hand and they strolled toward the shops and tourist attractions. In the bay to their left, a cargo hovercraft, surrounded by its self-generated mist, thundered past Alcatraz. He sensed the unanswered question between them like a malignant djinn.

Glumly, he noted the temperature and weather report to give himself something to watch. Even though she was walking beside him, he couldn't resist replaying "I'd love to have dinner with you." To give himself courage, he triggered the loop: "I'd love to . . . I'd love to . . . I'd love to. . ."

Beside him, she was a silent cipher, red hair spilled over her jacket, most of her face obscured. Just the edge of her cheek and a bit of her nose visible from the side. Something didn't look right about her. As they walked, he glanced at her from the corner of his eye several times. Finally, it occurred to him. She wasn't wearing her specs! He ran a quick check. Her Concierge was still in her apartment!

Casually, he reached up and pulled his own off. He blinked against the breeze hitting him square in the face for the first time. The specs went into his pocket. He shut down his Concierge, and his earplug went dead.

They passed sidewalk stands selling cheap T-shirts and San Francisco trinkets. Crab and beer smells escaped the restaurants. Tourists waited in

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lines for tables. She led them into a maze of souvenir displays, and then onto a boardwalk overlooking a small marina. Private fishing boats bobbed under the dock lights. It was nearly night. The buildings cut the wind, and Sanji didn't feel as cold.

Marlyss said, "I come here sometimes when I want to think." She sat on a wooden bench, and, when he sat beside her, she looked directly at him for the first time since they'd started walking. Her hand went to his cheek. "Sanji." She traced a line from his temple to the corner of his mouth. "I've never seen you without your specs."

And then they were kissing, her lips soft against his, her breath quick against his skin. After a minute, he realized that she was crying. His face was damp with it. With wonder, he touched a tear below her eye.

She said, "They told me you were an infodict. My friends told me you were . . . emotionally isolated." She giggled, a surprising sound in her throaty voice. "Oh, Sanji, I would love to marry you!"

And then they kissed again, long and silent. Sanji felt the waves beneath them lapping against the pilings, rocking their bench the tiniest bit. Seagulls cried in the bay. He held her close. She trembled, and he trembled too. It was all so huge, the emotion within. In the night, in the artificial light, the boats moved in elegant witness to the moment. Sanji knew that he would remember this instant forever.

He didn't know how long they'd sat before Marlyss straightened and pulled away from him. She wiped her face. "I need to tidy up a bit. Do you mind? There's a restroom just around the corner. I won't be a minute."

"Of course not," he said, and even these little words felt different, because now he was speaking them to the woman who'd said *yes*. Everything was different now: the quality of air, the quality of sound, all of it. "I'll be right here," he said.

She kissed him on the cheek, smiled, and walked to the corner of the building, her footsteps loud against the boards.

Sanji leaned back, the bench a firm support behind him, and he stretched his legs. He sighed. It was good.

Then he noticed a small box half-way up the light pole on the dock across the water, a police unit, an infrared camera turned on only at night for security. Of course, the police would watch closely at night, when most crimes occurred. He looked around. The area was thick with surveillance. *Accessible* surveillance. His hand snuck into his pocket, caressed his specs. He twitched the Concierge back to life.

Yes, there he was, in reds and blacks as the camera saw him. He expanded the search, jumping from camera to camera. There was the front of the building he sat behind now. There was the side. There was the door to the public restroom. Sanji backed up the infrared vid a couple of minutes. There was Marlyss, entering the restroom. Sanji turned the spider up a notch. Water ran in the restroom. A hand dryer pulled energy.

He thought, what's she thinking now? Is she sorry she said yes? Will she always love me? It would take a lot of data to know. The information would have to flow fast and furious. Yes, it would.

When she came out, he put the specs back in his pocket, but the Concierge was ready. The spider was running, and it would never rest. O

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The Great Goodbye

Robert Charles Wilson

Robert Charles Wilson is a Californian by birth, who has lived in Canada since the age of nine. He sold us a story, "Boulevard Life" in 1985 and his first novel, *A Hidden Place*, was published in 1986. That book will be reprinted by Tor/Orb in the near future. His recent novel *Darwinia* was a Hugo Award finalist, and his new book, *The Chronoliths*, will be out soon from Tor. After a sixteen-year-absence, we are pleased to have him back in our pages. The author lives outside Toronto.

This story was first published in the September 2000 issue of *Nature*. Used by permission of the author.

The hardest part of the Great Goodbye, for me, was knowing I wouldn't see my grandfather again. We had developed that rare thing, a friendship that crossed the line of the post-evolutionary divide, and I loved him very much.

Humanity had become, by that autumn of 2350, two very distinct human species—if I can use that antiquated term.

Oh, the Stock Humans remain a "species" in the classical evolutionary sense. They breed together to produce offspring and are infertile with other "species."

New People, of course, have foregone all that. Post-evolutionary, post-biological, hemi-organic, budded or engineered rather than birthed, New People are gloriously free from all the old human restraints. What unites us all is our common source, the Divine Complexity that shaped primordial quark plasma into stars, planets, planaria, people. Grandfather taught me that.

I had always known, of course, that we would one day be separated. But we first spoke of it, tentatively and reluctantly, a year ago. Grandfather went with me to the Museum of Devices in Brussels, a day trip. I was young and easily impressed by the full-scale working model of a "steam train" in the Machine Gallery—an amazingly baroque contrivance of ancient metalwork and gas-pressure technology. Staring at it, I thought (because Grandfather had taught me some of his "religion"): *Complexity made this. This is made of stardust, by stardust.*

We walked from the Machine Gallery to the Gallery of the Planets, drawing more than a few stares from the Stock People (children, especially) around us. It was uncommon to see a New Person fully embodied and in public. The Great Goodbye had been going on for more than a century; New People were already scarce on the earth, and a New Person walking with a

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Stock Person was an even more unusual sight—risqué, even shocking. But we bore the attention gamely. Grandfather held his head high and ignored the muttered insults.

The Gallery of the Planets recorded mankind's expansion into the solar system, and I hope the irony was obvious to everyone who sniffed at our presence there: Stock People could not have colonized any of these forbidding places (consider Ganymede in its primeval state!) without the partnership of the New. In a way, Grandfather said, this was the most appropriate place we could have come. It was a monument to the long collaboration that was rapidly reaching its end.

The stars, at last, are within our grasp. The grasp, anyhow, of the New People. Was this, I asked Grandfather, why he and I had to be so different from one another?

"Some people," he said, "some families, just happen to prefer the old ways. Soon enough Earth will belong to the Stocks once again, though I'm not sure this is entirely a good thing." And he looked at me sadly. "We've learned a lot from each other. We could have learned more."

"I wish we could be together for centuries and centuries," I said.

I saw him for the last time (some years ago now) at the Shipworks, where the picturesque ruins of Detroit rise from the Michigan Waters, and the star-traveling Polises are assembled and wait like bright green baubles to lift at last and forever into the sky. Grandfather had arranged this final meeting—in the flesh, so to speak.

We had delayed it as long as possible. New People are patient: in a way, that's the point. Stock Humans have always dreamed of the stars, but the stars remain beyond their reach. A Stock Human lifetime is simply too short; one or two hundred years won't take you far enough. Relativistic constraints demand that travelers between the stars must be *at home* between the stars. Only New People have the continuity, the patience, the flexibility to endure and prosper in the galaxy's immense voids.

I greeted Grandfather on the high embarkation platform where the wind was brisk and cool. He lifted me up in his arms and admired me with his bright blue eyes. We talked about trivial things, for the simple pleasure of talking. Then he said, "This isn't easy, this saying goodbye. It makes me think of mortality—that old enemy."

"It's all right," I said.

"Perhaps you could still change your mind?"

I shook my head no. A New Person can transform himself into a Stock Person and a Stock Person can elect to become a New Person, but the social taboos are strong, the obstacles (family dissension, legal entanglements) almost insurmountable, as Grandfather knew too well. And in any case that wasn't my choice. I was content as I was. Or so I chose to believe.

"Well, then," he said, empty, for once, of words. He looked away. The Polis would be rising soon, beginning its eons-long navigation of our near stellar neighbors. Discovering, no doubt, great wonders.

"Goodbye, boy," he said.

I said, "Goodbye, Grandfather."

Then he rose to his full height on his many translucent legs, winked one dish-sized glacial blue eye, and walked with a slow machinely dignity to the vessel that would carry him away. And I watched, desolate, alone on the platform with the wind in my hair, as his ship rose into the arc of the high clean noonday sky. ○

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Kage Baker is currently polishing the next novel in her Company series, *The Children of the Company*. For her latest tale, the author uses a broad canvas to paint an enthralling fantasy novella. Her story is both breath-takingly exciting, and, at times, extremely funny. We invite you to join Caravan Master Smith, the Keymen, Runner Burnbright, some unspeakable demons, and a host of other marvelous characters who embark on the dangerous journey of . . .

The Caravan from Troon

Kage Baker

Illustration by Mark Evans

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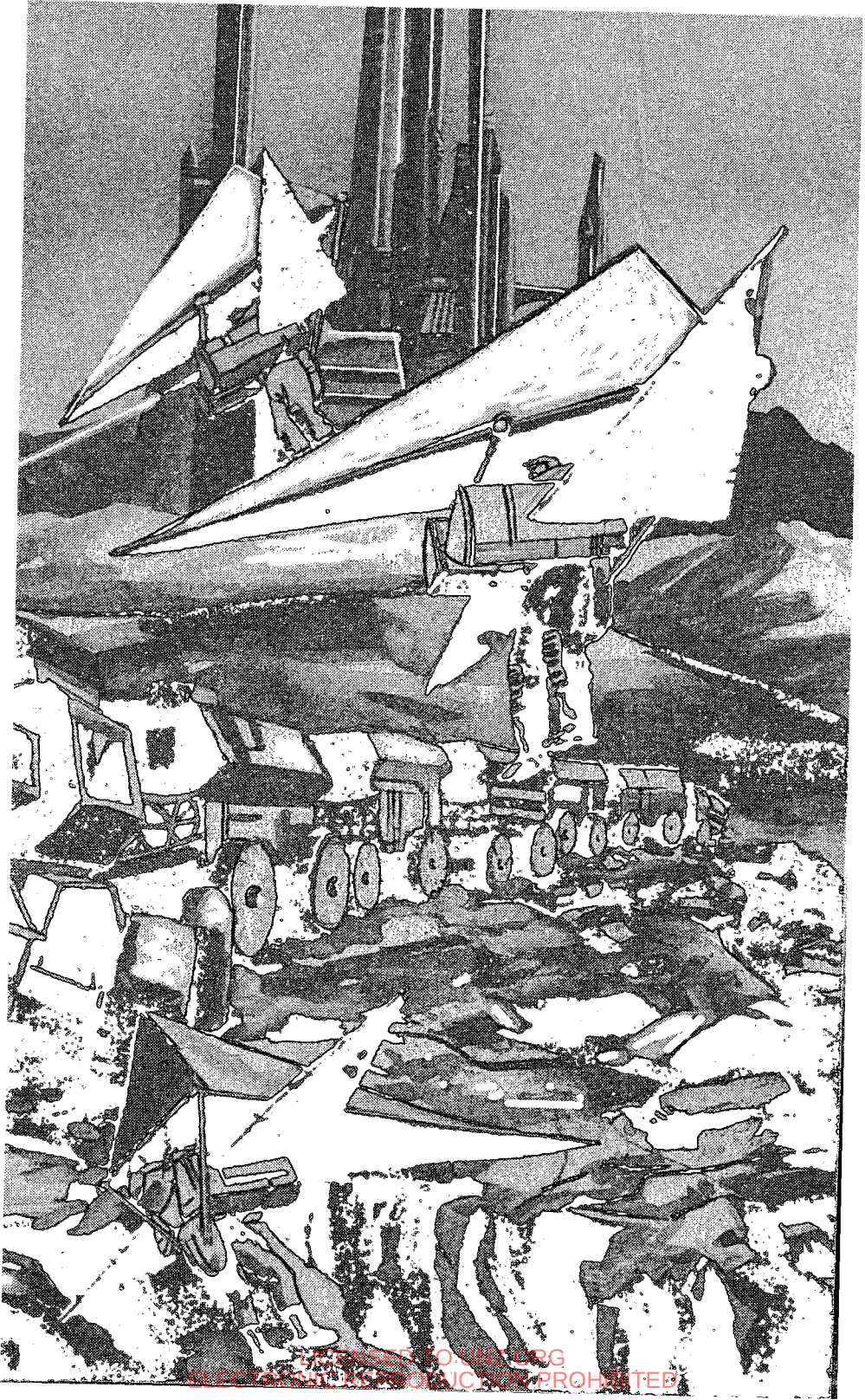

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Troon, the golden city, sat within high walls on a golden plain a thousand miles wide. The plain was golden with barley.

The granaries of golden Troon were immense, towered over the city like giants, taller than its endlessly-revolving windmills. Golden dust sifted down into its streets, and golden dust filled its air in the Month of the Red Moon and in every other month, for that matter; but most especially in that month when the harvest was brought in from the plain in long lines of creaking carts, which raised more dust that lay like a fine powder of gold on every dome and spire and harvester's hut.

All the people of Troon suffered from chronic emphysema.

Priding itself as it did, however, on being the World's Breadbasket, Troon endured. Wheezing was considered the most refined of speech mannerisms, and the social event of Troon's year was the Festival of Respiratory Masks.

On the fifth day of the Month of Chaff Storms, as a cold wind scoured the walls of Troon with stubble and husks, a man in a fish mask sat at a table in the Civic Ballroom and wished he were anywhere else.

He belonged to that race called the Children of the Sun, and like others of his kind he had skin and hair like a sunrise. They were, as a people, energetic, sanguine and mechanically minded, and traced their lineage back to a liaison between a smith-god and a fire-goddess somewhere in the depths of time. They were, consequently, given to sins of an ecological nature (the slag heaps from their smelters were mountainous) and they were also quarrelsome (their blood feuds were legendary).

A particularly nasty blood feud had sent the man in the fish mask fleeing to distant Troon—the reason he now sat disconsolately alone at a table watching the masked dancers as he sipped beer through a long straw. It wasn't his kind of party, but his cousin (to whom he had fled) had insisted he attend. The grand masked ball was held on the final night of a week of breathless celebration, and attended by everyone of distinction in Troon society.

"Er—Smith?"

The man in the fish mask turned his head, peering through the domed lenses of his fish eyes. *Smith* was not his real name, though it was the name of about every third member of his people, and so had seemed like a good alias. He got awkwardly to his feet as he saw his cousin approaching. His cousin's costume was fine and elaborate, robes of red-gold brocade and a fire efrit mask. No less elaborate was the costume of the lady he had in tow: butterfly wings of green and purple foil and a butterfly mask of the same material, through the wing spots of which she stared.

"This, madam, is Smith. My caravan master," explained his cousin. "A most experienced veteran of transport. A man in whose expert hands you may trust the rarest of commodities."

This was not exactly true. Smith had never led a caravan in his life, but his cousin's freight and passenger service had lost its former caravan master to a vendetta on the day of Smith's precipitate arrival in Troon, so he was learning the business.

"How nice to meet you," said the woman in the butterfly mask, and shot out a black and curling tongue. Smith nearly jumped out of his sandals, but the tongue was merely a clever feature of her mask, for it was hollow, and she poked it now into a tall glass of ice-punch.

"Honor on your house, lady," Smith murmured. His cousin coughed and said,

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"Smith, I have the *deep* honor to present Lady Seven Butterflies of Seven Butterflies Studio. You will be privileged to transport her celebrated creations!"

"I'm delighted," said Smith, bowing. "Rely on me, lady."

But Lady Seven Butterflies, true to her name, had lost interest in him and fluttered off to the punchbowl, and his cousin leaned close and grabbed him by the shoulder. They bumped papier-mâché faces as he hissed,

"Very important client! Almost ready to sign a contract granting us exclusive transport rights! Used to go with Stone and Son until they broke goods in transit. VITAL we catch the ball, cousin!"

"Oh. Right," said Smith, nodding sagely. "What are we shipping for her?"

"One gross of glass butterflies, what else?" said his cousin impatiently, and turned to pursue the lady. Smith sat down again, bewildered, and reflected that it was a good thing his new job was going to require him to be on the open road a lot. He didn't think people in Troon got enough oxygen.

He watched the dancers awhile in their stately pavanes, marveled at the symmetrical patterns their trailing brocades left in the rich layer of floor-dust, and brooded on the bloody sequence of events that had brought him here, beginning with an innocent walk to the corner for an order of fried eel.

Not that Smith was an innocent; but he had reached that time in his life when really good fried eel was at least as interesting as romance, a fact which made his subsequent misadventure all the more astonishing. Added to that was the fact that he was only nominally attractive, in a battered sort of way. Even the girl's brothers had to admit there must have been a mistake on somebody's part, though they had no intention of retracting their sworn vow to see Smith's head on a pike, since without benefit of hot-blooded youth or personal beauty he had nevertheless sent three of their kinsmen to the morgue.

He sighed now, swirling his beer glass and noting in disgust the fine sediment of dirt in the bottom. As he was about to wave for a waiter, however, his cousin came bustling up again with somebody new in tow.

". . . with complete confidence, my lord. The man is a seasoned veteran of the roads. Er—Smith! I have the *tremendous* honor of commending to your care the very noble Lord Ermenwyr of the House Kingfisher."

"Honor to your house, lord," said Smith, rising to his feet and thinking that he'd never heard of the House Kingfisher. Lord Ermenwyr was doubled over in a coughing fit, and so it was a moment before Smith was able to get a good look at him.

When he straightened up, dabbing at his lips with an embroidered handkerchief, Smith beheld a slender youth, rather short of stature. A pomaded and spangled beard was visible below his half-mask, which was that of a unicorn's head. He had extended the unicorn theme to an elaborate codpiece, from which a silver horn spiraled up suggestively. His eyes behind the mask had the glitter of fever.

"Hello," he croaked. "So you're the fellow taking me to Salesh-By-the-Sea? I hope you've had some training as a psychopomp too. I'll probably die on route."

"His lordship is pleased to be humorous," said Smith's cousin, wringing his hands. "His lord father has paid a great deal for his passage to the health resort at Salesh, and I have written to assure him in the strongest terms that Lord Ermenwyr will arrive there safely."

"Oh, really?" said Lord Ermenwyr. "Watch this, then." He reached out

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with the toe of his boot and drew a bull's eye in the dust. Leaping back several paces, he hawked and spat a gob of blood in a neat arc, hitting the center of the target.

"You see?" he said brightly, as Smith and his cousin stared. "Utterly moribund. Don't worry, though; I've got embalming spices in my luggage, and Daddy really isn't going to mind my early demise much, whatever he may have written."

Smith's cousin closed his mouth, and then said hastily: "It's simply the inconvenience of our local weather, my lord. I assure you, I myself coughed up a little blood not an hour ago. It passes with the first winter rains!"

"I'll be in Hell or Salesh by the time they start, I devoutly hope," snarled the young man. He turned a gimlet eye on Smith. "Well, Caravan Master, I suppose we're starting at some ungodly hour in the morning? If I'm still moaning on my painful couch at cockcrow you'll leave without me, no doubt?"

"The caravan departs from the central staging area by the West Gate in the hour before dawn, my lord," said Smith's cousin helpfully.

"Fine," said Lord Ermenwyr, and turned unsteadily on his heel. "I'm going to go get laid while I'm still among the living, then." He staggered off into the crowd, hitching up his spangled tights, and Smith looked at his cousin.

"Has he got anything catching?" he demanded.

"No! No! The young man has delicate lungs, that's all," chattered his cousin. "I believe his lord father's apt phrase was, er—" from the depths of his brocade he drew out a letter, heavy folded parchment to which was affixed a ponderous seal of black wax— "Here we are, *'hothouse lily.'* In any case the young lord will be traveling with a private nurse and ample store of physic, so your sole concern will be conveying him alive to Salesh-By-the-Sea."

"What if he dies, though?" asked Smith. His cousin shivered and, looking quickly at the letter as though it might overhear him, folded it again and thrust it out of sight.

"That would be very unfortunate indeed. His lord father is a powerful man, cousin. He's paid a great deal for this passage."

Smith sighed.

"And in any case he'll be in a palanquin the whole way," added his cousin, as though that answered everything. "You'll have him there in no time. A routine trip. Your first of many, I'm certain, to the continued honor and glory of our house. Ah! You'll excuse me—I must go speak to . . ." He turned and fled into the crowd, in pursuit of some other bedizened customer.

Smith sat down, and had taken another sip of his beer before he remembered the mud in the bottom of the glass.

The gonging of the cistern-clock in Smith's apartment warren woke him, and he was up and pulling on his coat in very little time. He paused before arming himself, considering his stock of hand weapons. He settled for a pair of boot knives and a machete; nothing more would be needed, surely, for a routine trip to the coast.

He was, accordingly, surprised when his cousin met him at the West Gate in the predawn gloom with a pair of pistolbows and a bolt-bandoleer.

"You've used these before?" his cousin asked, draping the bandoleer over Smith's shoulder and buckling it in place.

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"Yes, but—you said—"

"Yes, I know, it's all routine, easiest road there is, but just consider this as insurance. Eh? And it makes a man look dangerous and competent, and that's what the passengers want to see in a caravan master," explained his cousin. "There you are! The picture of menace. Now, here's the cargo and passenger manifest." He thrust an open scroll at Smith. Smith took it and read, as his cousin ran off to shriek orders at the porters who were loading what looked like immense violet eggs into one of the transport carts.

There was, indeed, a gross of glass butterflies, being shipped from Seven Butterflies studio to the Lady Katmile of Silver Anvil House in Port Ward'b. To Be Handled With Exquisite Care.

There were twenty sacks of superfine cake flour from Old Troon Mills, destined for a bakery in Lesser Salesh. There were thirty boxes of mineral pigments from the strip mines in Outer Troon, to be delivered to Starfire Studio in Salesh Hills. No eggs, though, violet or otherwise.

The passengers were listed as Lytan and Demara Smith and Family, custom jewelry designers, of Salesh Hills; Parradan Smith, courier, of Mount Flame City; Lord Ermenwyr of the House Kingfisher, and Servant. All Children of the Sun.

Also listed was one Ronrishim Flowering Reed, herbalist, of Salesh-by-the-Sea. From his name he was probably a Yendri, one of the forest people who occasionally fought guerrilla wars with the Children of the Sun over what they felt was excessive logging.

Smith looked out at the boarding area and spotted the Yendri, taller than the other passengers, wearing fewer clothes, and standing a little apart with an aloof expression. The Yendri people had skin that ranged in color from a gently olive complexion to outright damn *green,* were willowy and graceful and everything you'd expect in a forest-dwelling race. They were thought by the Children of the Sun to be arrogant, uncivilized, untrustworthy and sexually insatiable (when not perversely effeminate). They said exactly the same things about the Children of the Sun.

The other passengers were equally easy to identify. The Smiths were clearly the young couple huddled with a screaming baby, waving a sugarstick and stuffed toy at him while their other little ones ran back and forth merrily and got in the way of the sweating porters. Parradan Smith must be the well-dressed man leaning against a news kiosk, reading a broadside sheet. Lord Ermenwyr, who had evidently not died in the night, sat a little apart from the others on one of many expensive-looking trunks piled beside a curtained palanquin.

He had changed his unicorn costume for a black tailcoat and topboots, and combed the spangles out of his beard and mustache. It failed to make him look less like the pasty-faced boy he was, though his features were even and handsome. His eyes were unnervingly sharp, fixed on the screaming infant with perfectly astonishing malevolence. He glanced up, spotted Smith, and leaped to his feet.

"You! Caravan Master. Is that damned brat going to squall the whole trip? Is it?" he demanded, folding his arms as Smith approached him.

"I don't think so," said Smith, staring down at Lord Ermenwyr's eyes. His pupils were like pinpoints, perhaps due to whatever drug the lordling was smoking in the long jade tube he had presently clenched between his teeth. It produced trailing purple clouds, vaguely sweet-scented. "Should you really be—"

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"Smoking? It's my medication, damn you! If that child isn't silenced at once I'll not be answerable for the consequences. I'm a sick man—"

"Master, you're raving again," said a silken voice from behind the curtains of the palanquin. "Stop that at once."

"—And if I'm harried to an early grave, or should I say an earlier grave, *well* then, Caravan Master, you'll pay for it in ways you can't even begin to—"

"Nursie warned you," said the voice, and an arm flashed between the curtains and caught Lord Ermenwyr around the knees. He vanished backward into the depths of the palanquin with a yelp, and there were sounds of a violent struggle as the palanquin rocked on its base. Smith stepped quickly away.

"Er—Smith!" cried his cousin. "I'd like you to meet your subordinates."

Smith turned to see a crowd of caravaneers who clearly disliked being described as his subordinates. They gave him a unanimous resentful stare as he approached.

"May I present the esteemed keymen? Keyman Crucible, Keyman Smith, Keyman Bellows, Keyman Pinion, Keyman Smith."

They were, as all keymen, compact fellows with tremendously developed arms, and so alike they might have been quintuplets.

"Nice meeting you," said Smith. They grunted at him.

"This is your runner." His cousin placed his hands on the shoulders of a very young, very skinny girl. She wore the red uniform and carried the brass trumpet of her profession, but she was far from the curvaceous gymnast Smith fantasized about when he fantasized about runners. She glowered up at Smith's cousin.

"Take your hands off me or you'll hear from my mother house," she said. Smith's cousin withdrew his hands as though she were a live coal.

"Young Burnbright hasn't earned her full certification, yet, but she's hoping to do so in our service," he said delicately. "If all goes well, that is. And here, Smith, is our culinary artist! May I present the two-time winner of the Troon Municipal Bakeoff? Mrs. Smith."

Mrs. Smith, who was large and not particularly young, looked sourly on Smith.

"Do you do fried eel?" Smith asked hopefully.

"Perhaps," she said. "If I'm properly motivated. If I have the proper *pans*." She spat out the last word with bewildering venom, turning her glare on Smith's cousin.

He wrung his hands. "Now, dear Mrs. Smith—I'm sure you'll manage without the extra utensils, this one time. It was necessary."

"Leaving half my kitchen behind for those bloody things?" Mrs. Smith demanded, pointing at the carts laden with giant eggs. "They take up three times the room of an ordinary shipment! What was wrong with regular crates, I'd like to know?"

"In addition to her other talents, Lady Seven Butterflies is a genius at innovative packing and insulation," said Smith's cousin earnestly. "She had the inspiration from Nature itself, you see. What, after all, is the perfect protective shape devised by Nature? The egg, of course—"

"Balls," said Mrs. Smith.

"—with its ovoid shape, elegantly simple yet strong, a holistic solution providing plenty of insulating space for the most fragile creations—"

"How am I going to feed my boys, let alone serve up the gourmet experi-

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ence for passengers so grandiloquently advertised on your handbills, you imbecile man?" shouted Mrs. Smith.

"We'll work something out," said Smith, stepping between them. "Look, I'm traveling pretty lightly. Maybe we can take some of your pans in the lead cart?"

Mrs. Smith considered him, one eyebrow raised. "An intelligent suggestion," she said, mollified, as Pinion and Crucible seized up a vast crate marked KITCHEN and hurried with it to Smith's cart. "We may get on, young Smith."

"Of course you will," said Smith's cousin, and fled.

It was nearly light now. Those whose duty it was came yawning and shivering to the West Gate, bending to the spokes of the great windlass. The gate rose slowly in its grooves, and a cold wind swept in off the plain and sent spirals of dust into the pink air. A trumpeter mounted the turret by the gate and announced by his blast that another day of commerce had begun, for better or worse, and Burnbright answered with a fanfare to let the passengers know that it was time to board.

The keymen mounted to their posts and began cranking the mighty assemblage of gears and springs in each lead cart. The passengers took their seats, with the Smiths' baby still crying dismally, as the last of the luggage was loaded by the porters. There was a moment of dithering with Lord Ermenwyr's palanquin until it was lifted and lashed in place atop his trunks. Purple fumes escaped between the fluttering curtains, so it was evident he was still alive in there, if preserving a sullen silence.

Mrs. Smith mounted to a seat beside Crucible, pulled a pair of dust-goggles over her eyes, and with unhurried majesty drew out a smoking tube and packed it with a particularly pungent blend of weed. She held a clever little device of flicking flint and steel to its tip, shielding it from the wind as she attempted to ignite the weed.

Burnbright sprinted to the front of the line, backing out through the gate and calling directions to the porters as they wrestled the wheels of the lead cart into the grooves in the red road, worn deep by time and utility. Smith's cousin clasped his hands and prayed, as he always did at this point; and Smith, realizing belatedly that he was supposed to be in the lead cart beside Pinion, ran for it and vaulted into his seat, or attempted to, because the crate marked KITCHEN occupied that space.

Pinion just looked at him, poised over the tight-wound coil. Smith, determined to show he was game, climbed up and perched awkwardly atop the crate. He looked forward at Burnbright and waved.

She lifted her trumpet, and blew the staccato call for departure. Then she turned and ran forward, swift as flight; for behind her the keymen threw the release pins and the caravan lurched rumbling out through the gate, late as usual, a dozen linked carts impelled by gear-and-spring engines, following the grooved stone, bearing their disparate cargo.

Mrs. Smith got her smoke going at last and leaned back, holding it elegantly between the first two fingers of her left hand, blowing a plume of smoke like a banner. In the cart behind her, the Yendri coughed and waved smoke away, cursing. The rising sun struck flame on the flare of Burnbright's trumpet.

They were off.

"This is pretty easy," remarked Smith after the first hour of travel. Troon

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was a distant clutch of towers behind them. Before them and to all sides spread the wide yellow fields, unrelieved but for the occasional bump of a distant harvest village. The red road stretched ahead, two grooved lanes running west to the infinite horizon, two parallels running east, and Burnbright had slowed to an easy mile-devouring lope a few hundred yards in front.

"You think it's easy, do you?" said Pinion, giving the gears a gentle pump. Once the initial winding had got them going, the keymen kept forward momentum by steadily cranking the mechanism.

"Well, yes," said Smith. "Look at it! Flat as a board. No place for a bandit to hide as far as the eye can see. Nobody's at war, so we don't have to worry about any armies sweeping down on us. Nothing to do but chug along, eh?"

"Unless a dust storm comes up," Pinion told him. "Which they tend to do, now the harvest's in. I've seen some cyclones in my day, I can tell you. Even the regular prevailing wind'll fill the channels in the road with dust, and if the little girl up there doesn't spot it in time we might all rattle off the road into a field, or hit a block at top speed and strip all our gears—that's lovely fun."

"Oh," said Smith. "Does that happen often?"

"Often enough," said Pinion, pumping the gears again.

"At least it doesn't sound like I'll need these," said Smith, looking down at his pistolbows.

"Probably not," conceded Pinion. "Until we reach the Greenlands."

"What's in the Greenlands?"

Pinion was silent a moment.

"You're a city boy, aren't you?" he said at last.

"I have been," said Smith, shifting on top of the kitchen crate. "Come on, what's in the Greenlands? Besides a lot of Yendri," he added, glancing back at their sole Yendri passenger, who had wrapped a scarf about his nose and mouth and sat ignoring the others.

"To begin with, that's where you've got your real bandits," Pinion said. "And not your run-along-by-the-side-of-the-road-and-yip-threateningly bandits either, I'm talking about your bury-the-road-in-a-landslide-and-dig-out-the-loot bandits. See? And then there's greenies like that one," he went on, jerking a thumb in the direction of the Yendri. "They may *say* they're for nonviolence, but they're liable to pile rocks and branches and all kinds of crap on the road if they're miffed about us cutting down one of their damn groves to build a way station or something."

"Huh." Smith looked back at the Yendri uneasily.

"Of course, they're not the worst," added Pinion.

"I guess they wouldn't be."

"There's beasts, of course."

"They're everywhere, though."

"Not like in the Greenlands. And even they're nothing to the demons."

"All right," said Smith, "you're trying to scare me, aren't you? Is this some kind of initiation?"

"No," said Pinion in a surly voice, though in fact he had been trying to scare Smith. "Just setting you straight on a few things, Caravan Master. I'd hate to see you so full of self-confidence you get us all killed your first day on the job."

"Thanks a lot," said Smith. The caravan went rumbling on, the featureless fields flew by, and after a moment Smith looked down at Pinion again.

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"I did hear a story about the Greenlands, now that I come to think about it," he said. "In a bar in Chadravac Beach, about six months ago. Something about a demon-lord. He's supposed to be called the Master of the Mountain?"

Pinion blanched, but did not change expression. He shook his head, pumping away at the gears.

"Don't know anything about that," he said firmly, and fell silent.

All that day they traveled across the yellow land. With no companion but the sun they came at evening to the way station, marked out by a ring of white stones.

It was a wide circular area by the side of the road, with grooves for carts running off, and grooves for running back on. There was a tiny stone hut surmounted by a windwheel pump, enclosing a basin where a trickle of water flowed, drawn up from deep beneath the plain. The moment they had rolled off the road and into the circle, the Yendri was out of his cart and staggering for the pump house. He monopolized it for the next quarter-hour, to the great annoyance of the other passengers, who lined up behind the hut and made ethnically insulting remarks as they waited.

At least this kept most of them occupied as Smith oversaw making camp for the night. He didn't really have much to do; the keymen, long practiced in this art, had quickly trundled the carts in a snaked circle and set to erecting tent accommodations inside it. Burnbright and Mrs. Smith were busily setting up the kitchen pavilion, and politely implied that he'd only get in their way if he lent a hand there.

Smith noticed that Lord Ermenwyr was not among the carpers at the water pump, and he wondered whether he ought not to see if the lordling had died after all. As he approached the palanquin, the curtains parted and a woman slid out with all the grace of a serpent, and dropped lightly to the ground.

Smith caught his breath.

That she was beautiful was almost beside the point. She had a *presence.* Her body was lush, tall, perfect, powerful. Her mouth was full and red, and her sloe-black eyes ought to have been sullen but glinted instead with lazy good humor as she saw Smith gaping at her.

"Good evening, Caravan Master," she said, and the voice matched the body: sultry, yet with an indefinable accent of education and good breeding.

Smith just nodded, and collected himself enough to say: "I was coming to inquire after the lord's health."

"How nice. His lordship is still with us, I'm happy to say." She tilted her head to one side and occupied herself a moment with loosely braiding her hair, that was black and thick as a bolt of silk. Having pulled it up into an elegant chignon, she drew from her bosom what appeared to be a pair of stilettos of needle-like fineness and thrust them through the glossy coils.

"I . . . uh . . . I'm very happy to hear that. We're just setting up the tents now, if he'd like to rest, " said Smith.

"That's very thoughtful of you, but my lord has his own pavilion," the woman replied, opening one of the trunks and drawing out a bundle of black cloth patterned all over with little silver skulls.

"I'd be happy to help you, miss—"

"Balnshik," said the woman, smiling. "Thank you so much, Caravan Master."

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What an exotic name, Smith thought dizzily, accepting the load of tent material while Balnshik bent over the trunk to rummage for poles. Something about the name suggested flint knives and attar of roses, and perhaps black leather . . . though she was modestly attired in white linen, and he dragged his attention back to the fact that she was a nurse, after all. She drew out a tent pole now and gave it a quick twist, and in her deft hands it shot up and expanded to twice its length, spring-loaded.

"I'm—Smith," he said.

"Of course you are, dear," she told him. "Just spread that out on the ground, won't you?"

He helped her assemble the pavilion, which was quite a large and sumptuous one, and then there was a lot of collapsible furniture to be set up, so it was a while before Smith remembered to inform her:

"We'll be serving gourmet cuisine shortly, as advertised. We can offer his lordship—"

"Oh, don't worry about him; the little beast can't keep down anything solid," said Balnshik serenely, tossing a handful of incense onto a brazier.

"I can hear every word you're saying, you know." Lord Ermenwyr's voice floated from the palanquin. He sounded peevish.

"What about some clear broth, darling?"

"No. I'm still motionsick and anyway it'll probably be poisoned."

Balnshik's eyes flashed, and she turned to Smith with a charming smile in which there were a great many white and gleaming teeth. "Will you excuse us, please? I must attend to my lord."

So saying, she vaulted into the palanquin, vanishing behind the curtains, and Smith heard the unmistakable sound of a ringing slap and the palanquin began to rock and thump in place once more. It seemed like a good idea to leave.

He wandered over to the kitchen pavilion, where Mrs. Smith had lit a fire and set saucepans bubbling at magical speed, and was now busily dabbing caviar on little crackers.

"Can you prepare an order of clear broth?" he asked.

"What, for the greenie?" She glared across at Ronrishim Flowering Reed, who had finally relinquished the hut and was now seated in front of a tent, apparently meditating. "Bloody vegetarians. I hate cooking for those people. 'Oh, please, I'll just have a dish of rainwater at precisely air temperature with an ounce of mother's milk on the side, and if it's not too much trouble, could you float a couple of violets on it?' Faugh!"

"No, actually, it's for Lord Ermenwyr." Smith looked over his shoulder at the palanquin, which was motionless now.

"Oh. The invalid?" Mrs. Smith turned to peer at the pavilion. "Heavens, what a grand tent. He's a nasty-looking little piece of goods, I must say, but as he's dying I suppose we must make the effort. A good rich capon stock with wine, I think."

"Parradan Smith's a gangster," Burnbright informed them, coming close and appropriating a cracker.

"Get away from those, child. What do you mean?"

"I peeked when he was washing himself, and he's got secret society tattoos all over," said Burnbright, retreating beyond the reach of Mrs. Smith's carving knife. "And he's got an instrument case he never lets go of almost. And knives."

"How do you know they're secret society tattoos?" Smith was troubled.

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"Because he's from Mount Flame City, and I'm from there too, and I know what the Bloodfires' insignia look like," said Burnbright matter-of-factly. "Their deadly enemies are the House Copperhammer. When they've got a war on, you find body parts in the strangest places. All over town."

"Lovely," grunted Mrs. Smith.

"He's listed on the manifest as a courier," said Smith, looking out at the man in question, who sat just inside the door of a tent, polishing his boots. Burnbright nodded sagely.

"Couriering somebody's loot somewhere, see. I'll bet he's got a fortune in that instrument case. Unless it's a disguise, and he's accepted a contract on one of the other passengers and he's biding his time before he kills them!" she added, her little face alight.

"Wretched creatures. He'd better leave *me* alone; I never travel unarmed," said Mrs. Smith, handing her the tray of hors d'oeuvres. "Go set that on the buffet and inform the guests that the main course will be served in half an hour. Grilled quail glazed with acacia honey, stuffed with wild plums."

It was as good as it sounded. Even the Smiths' infant stopped crying for a while, given a leg bone with sauce to suck on.

When twilight had fallen Balnshik emerged from the palanquin, carrying Lord Ermenwyr in her arms like a limp rag doll, and settled him in the splendid pavilion before coming out for a plate for herself and a bowl of broth for her lord. She made as profound an impression on the other males in the party as she'd made on Smith. Even the Smiths' two little boys stopped chewing, and with round eyes watched her progress across the camp.

She seemed not to notice the attention she drew, was courteous and formal. Smith thought he saw her glance sidelong at the Yendri, once, with a glitter of amused contempt in her eyes, before there came a querulous feeble cry from the pavilion and she turned to hurry back to Lord Ermenwyr.

"Clearly she doesn't think much of Mr. Flowering Reed," pronounced Mrs. Smith, and had a drag at her smoking tube. She was sitting at her ease with a drink beside the fire, as the keymen cleared away the dinner things for her.

"Except I hear the Yendri are supposed to have really big, um, you know," said Burnbright. Mrs. Smith shrugged.

"It depends upon what you mean by Big, dear."

"I think we made pretty good time today," said Smith. "No disasters or anything. Don't you think it went well?"

"Tolerably well," said Mrs. Smith. "At least there weren't any breakdowns this time. Can't count the hours I've wasted at the side of the road waiting for replacement gears."

"Have you been with the caravan long?" Smith asked her.

"Twenty years, next spring," she replied.

"Traveled much through the Greenlands?"

"Far too often."

Smith glanced over at Pinion, who was scouring out a pot with sand, and lowered his voice when he spoke.

"Have you ever heard of somebody, a demon or something, called the Master of the Mountain?"

Mrs. Smith gave him a sharp look, and Burnbright cringed and made a gesture to ward off evil. "Clearly," said Mrs. Smith, "you're not from the interior. You're from the islands, I'd bet, or you'd know about him."

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Smith wasn't anxious that anyone should know where he'd been born, so he just said, "Is he in the Greenlands? Is he a demon?"

Mrs. Smith waved her drink at the Yendri, who was just retiring into his tent. "That one could probably tell you more, though I doubt he would however nicely you asked. You haven't heard of the Master of the Mountain? Half demon and half something else, or so the story goes. Yendri, possibly, though you wouldn't know it from the way they hate him. Mind you, he's given them enough reasons."

"What reasons?" Smith drew closer, because she was lowering her voice. She hitched her folding chair a little nearer to him, and pointed off into the night, toward the northwest.

"You'll be able to see it, in a week or so, poking up out of the horizon: a black mountain like a shark's tooth, perfectly immense. That's his stronghold, and he can look down from up there on every inch of the Greenlands, and you can bet he'll be watching us as we creep past on our tiny road. If we're very fortunate he won't trouble himself to come down to say How d'ye do.

"I don't know how long he's been up there; a couple of generations, at least. There's talk he used to be a mercenary. Certainly he's some sort of powerful mage. Demon armies at his beck and call, spies in every city, all that sort of thing. These days he contents himself with swooping down and raiding our caravans now and again. But there was a time when he singled out *them* for the worst of his plundering." Mrs. Smith pointed at the Yendri's tent.

"No idea why. You wouldn't think they'd have anything worth stealing, would you, in those funny little brushwood villages of theirs? Something personal, seemingly.

"In any case—you're aware they used to be slaves, the Yendri? No, not to us—that's one thing they can't blame us for, at least. It was somewhere else, and somebody else enslaved them, until they overthrew their masters and escaped. There was some kind of miracle child whose birth sparked the slave rebellion. One of their greenie prophets carried her before them like a figurehead, and they all emigrated here. When she grew up she became their Saint. Heals the sick, raises the dead, most beautiful woman in the world, et cetera. You haven't heard of the Green Saint either?

"Well. So the Yendri settled down as a free people then, with no troubles except the Master of the Mountain raiding their villages with dreadful glee, which I understand he did on very nearly a weekly basis. And then, oh horrors! He captured the Green Saint herself.

"Though I have heard she went and offered herself to him, if he'd stop being so terribly evil," Mrs. Smith added parenthetically, and drew on her smoke again. "However it happened—she moved in with him on his mountain, and while she didn't exactly convert him to a virtuous life, he did stop burning the poor greenies' wigwams about their ears. Not that they were grateful. They were furious, in fact, especially when he and she proceeded to have a vast brood of very mixed children. Said it was sacrilege."

"A demon and a saint having kids?" Smith pondered it. "Funny."

"Not to the Yendri, it isn't," said Mrs. Smith.

"Let's talk about something else," begged Burnbright.

So the subject was changed. Not long afterward the fire was banked and everyone retired for the night, with the exception of the Smiths' baby, who cried for a good hour.

* * *

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The next day, once camp was broken, proceeded in much the same way as the previous one had. Endless hours they rumbled across the empty fields, and though Smith watched the horizon he saw no threatening darkness there, not that day nor on the next few to follow. The Smiths' infant cried, the Yendri kept himself aloof, Parradan Smith killed no one, and Lord Ermenwyr did not die, though he remained in his palanquin as they traveled and the purple fume of his irritation streamed backward in the wind.

"Mama!" shrieked the Smiths' younger boy, pointing behind them. "Dragons!"

It was the fifth day out, and the Smith children were reaching critical mass for boredom.

"Don't be silly, dearest," his mother told him wearily, jogging the screaming baby on her shoulder.

"I'm not! They're flying up behind us and they're going to get us! Look!"

Nobody bothered to look except Smith, who turned on his high crate to glance over his shoulder. To his astonishment, he saw some five or six winged forms in the air behind them, at a distance of no more than a mile or two. He turned completely around, bracing his feet on the edge of the cart, and shaded his eyes for a good look.

"The dragons will get us!" chorused the Smiths' other children, beginning to wail and cry.

"No, no, they won't," Smith shouted helpfully, looking down into their cart. "Dragons won't hurt you. And anyway, I don't think—"

"The lord in the black tent says they do," protested the little boy. "I went in when the big lady came out to eat so I could see if he was really a vampire like the runner said and he told me he wasn't, only he'd been bit by a dragon when he was a little boy for making too much noise and it made him half-dead forever but he was lucky 'cause most dragons just eat children that make too much noise, they fly overhead on big wings and just catch them and eat them up like bugs!!!"

"Now, Wolkin—" said his father.

"I told you not to bother that man!" said his mother.

"Well, that just isn't true," yelled Smith, mentally damning Lord Ermenwyr. "Dragons don't do that kind of thing, all right, son? They're too small. I've seen 'em. All they do is fly over the water and catch fish. They build nests in cliffs. People make umbrellas out of their wings. No, what we've got here are gliders." He pointed up at the winged figures, who were much nearer now.

"Yes, Wolkin, you see? Perfectly harmless," said his father.

"Just people with big wings strapped on," explained Smith. "Sort of. They carry letters sometimes."

"And they have, er, flying clubs and competitions," added his father. "Nothing to be afraid of at all."

"Of course not," Smith agreed. "Look, here they come. Let's all wave."

The children waved doubtfully.

"Look," said the Smiths' little girl. "They've got pistolbows just like you have, Caravan Master."

"What?" said Smith, as a bolt thunked into his left thigh.

The gliders were raking the caravan with boltfire. The result was screaming confusion and an answering barrage of shot from the caravans. Smith, firing both his weapons, glimpsed Parradan Smith standing, snarling, bal-

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ancing as he sent boltfire from an apparently inexhaustible magazine into the nearest gliders. He saw Balnshik hanging out the side of the palanquin, bracing her feet on an immense old hunting weapon and firing with deadly accuracy.

It was over in seconds. The closest of the gliders veered off, dropped something beside the road, and went down in a tangle of snapping struts and collapsing green fabric. The others wheeled. They lifted and floated off to the east, rapidly vanishing. The thing that had been dropped coughed, spurted dust and then exploded, throwing liquid flame in all directions. Fortunately the carts were well clear by the time it went off.

"Stop," gasped Smith, but the keymen were already applying the brakes. The carts shuddered to a stop, their iron wheels grinding in the stone ruts and sending up a flare of sparks the whole length of the caravan. He jumped from his high seat and fell, clutching his wounded leg. Scrambling up painfully he saw Parradan Smith already out and running for the fallen glider, holding a freshly cocked weapon upright over his head as he ran. Burnbright had turned and was racing back toward them, looking terrified.

"Anybody hurt?" Smith shouted, leaning against the cart as he tried to stanch the flow of blood down his leg.

It was some moments before he could get a coherent answer. Luckily, he had been the only one to sustain a wound. Keyman Smith had been slightly stunned by a bolt striking his steel pot-helmet, deflected by its wide brim; another shot had ricocheted and hit Keyman Crucible sidelong on his upper arm, leaving a welted bruise the size of a handball. Lord Ermenwyr was unharmed, but his luggage was struck through with a dozen bolts at least, and he had leaped from the palanquin and was screaming threats, in surprisingly full voice, at the remaining gliders, now only distant specks on the horizon.

"So much for his being a vampire," Smith muttered to himself. He was binding up his leg with a rag when Parradan Smith approached him, his face stony.

"You'd better come see this," he said.

"Is he dead?" Smith inquired, limping forward. The other man just nodded.

The glider was certainly dead. His neck had been snapped when his aircraft crashed, and lay at a distinctly unnatural angle now; but it was obvious he'd been dead well before the impact. His quilted flightsuit was torn and bloody in a dozen places.

"Damn," said Smith.

"Those are my bolts," said Parradan Smith, pointing out a scatter of small black-centered wounds. "Custom-made. Those two would be yours, probably."

"You're a lucky, lucky man," Lord Ermenwyr told the corpse, coming up to stare at it balefully. "If you were still alive, after what you've done to my best shirts—well, I wouldn't want to be you, that's all." He prodded the body with his boot. "No weapons. I suppose he was the one designated to drop the incendiary device."

"Probably."

"Good job Nursie nailed him before he managed it." He poked at the man's left arm, from which a big barbed steel projectile protruded.

"So these are hers too?" Parradan Smith pointed at two others, one in the dead man's right leg and one between his ribs.

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"Yes. They're designed to take down elk."

"And these are mine, and these are Caravan Master's, so—" Parradan Smith stooped and pulled three feathered darts from the body. "Who the hell fired these?"

Lord Ermenwyr's eyes widened, seemed in fact on the point of starting out of his face.

"I'd be careful with those, if I were you," he said faintly.

They were little tubes of cane, tipped with what appeared to be thorns and fletched with small curling green feathers.

"Poisoned?" inquired Smith.

"Aren't all darts that mysteriously appear out of nowhere smeared with deadly poison?" said Lord Ermenwyr. Parradan Smith tossed them away.

"Do you know who fired them?"

"No!"

"Well, somebody fired them," said Smith. "What I'd like to know is, what was this one trying to do? Him and his friends?"

"Trying to kill me, obviously," said Lord Ermenwyr.

"Have you enemies, my lord?"

"Dozens of them," Lord Ermenwyr replied. "And they're nothing to Daddy's enemies. In fact, I wouldn't put this past Daddy. He's never been fond of me." His rage had burned quickly down to ash and he was pale, beginning to shake.

"Don't be ridiculous, Master," said Balnshik, appearing behind them suddenly. She looked over the battered corpse with a cold eye. "You know perfectly well that if your lord father had wanted you dead, you'd be dead by now." She stooped and pulled her steel points from the body. Some of the clothing tore as she retrieved the last one, and Smith leaned forward with an exclamation.

"Look, he's got a tattoo!"

"So he has." Balnshik glanced down at it. "One of those nasty little assassins' gangs, isn't it? There you are, Master, you see? Nothing to worry about."

"Nothing to worry about?" cried Lord Ermenwyr, his eyes bugging out again. "When I might have been riddled with boltfire and burned into the bargain? By the Nine Hells, what do you think's worth worrying about?" His voice rose to a scream. "You're going to let me die in this horrible featureless wilderness and I'll have no tomb, not even a proper funeral—"

He broke off with an *oof* as Balnshik seized him and threw him over one shoulder.

"You'll have to excuse his Lordship," she said. "It's time for his fix. Come along, darling." She turned and strode back to the caravan.

Smith stared after her and then his attention was drawn back to the corpse, as Parradan Smith bent and methodically dug his bolts from the wounds.

"Is that an assassins' tattoo?" he asked.

"How should I know?" said Parradan Smith tonelessly, not looking up.

They scraped out a grave in the dry ground, and covered the body with a thin layer of earth and stones. The green wings were laid over all.

Speed once they'd started up again was limited, because Keyman Crucible's arm became swollen and painful. It was well after dark by the time they were able to make camp; by then Smith's leg was throbbing and fairly

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swollen too. As the fires were lit, as the tents were being set up, he limped slowly to the hut and waited for Ronrishim Flowering Reed to emerge.

"You're an herbalist, aren't you?" he said, when the Yendri came out.

Flowering Reed looked him up and down with distaste.

"Are you going to ask me for healing?" he asked.

"Yes, if you can help me."

"In the name of the Unsullied Daughter, then," he said. "I will require clean water. Have your minions fetch it."

The only person available to be a minion was Burnbright, who obligingly fetched a bucket of water from the pump and stayed to watch as Smith reclined before Flowering Reed's tent and submitted to having his trouser leg sliced open.

"Aren't you going to cauterize it with something?" she inquired, wincing as Smith's wound was probed. Smith grunted and turned his face away.

"Do you use a sword to cut through flowers?" replied the Yendri, extracting the bolt and regarding it critically. "Ah, but I forget; you people do. It may surprise you to learn that the most violent solution to a difficulty is not always the best one."

"I was just asking, for goodness' sake!" said Burnbright, and stormed away.

"Got anything for pain?" Smith asked through clenched teeth. Flowering Reed shook his head.

"I do not keep opiates for my personal use," he said. "I believe it is better to learn to bear with inevitable suffering."

"I see," said Smith.

"When you and all your people learn to see, there will be rejoicing and astonishment through the worlds," said Flowering Reed.

"Just at the moment I'm more bent on surviving than learning anything, all right?" said Smith. The Yendri shrugged as if to say *I expected as much* and, cupping his hands in the water, washed out Smith's wound.

Smith endured in silence as his wound was cleaned, as the Yendri took a pungent-smelling ointment from his pack and anointed the wound. As he shifted so the bandage could be wound about his leg, he looked over at Flowering Reed.

"What do you make of the attack today?" he inquired.

Flowering Reed shrugged again. "One of your people's interminable quarrels. Filth slew filth, and so filth lusted after vengeance."

Smith decided there was no point attempting to defend the blood feud as part of his cultural heritage. "But who do you think they were after?"

"I have no idea, nor any interest in the matter," said Flowering Reed. "Though if I cared to speculate on such a thing, I might begin by observing who defended himself most viciously."

He tied off the bandage, and Smith sat up awkwardly. "Parradan Smith? I guess that makes a certain sense."

"Perhaps. On the other hand, your people are always ready to unleash violence upon others. He may simply have been the best prepared."

"Nice to get an unbiased opinion," said Smith, getting to his feet.

"Leave me now. I must pray and cleanse myself."

"Go ahead." Smith limped away, and Burnbright came running to lend her shoulder for support.

"Isn't he awful?" she hissed. "Now he'll put his nose in the air and meditate on how much better he is than anybody else."

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"At least he was willing to fix my leg," Smith said.

"Only because you asked him. They have to if they're asked; it's part of their religion or something. Don't think for a minute he'd have offered on his own."

"You don't like the Yendri very much, do you?"

"They're always raping runners," Burnbright informed him. "Not so much caravan runners like me but the solos, the long-distance messengers, all the time."

"That's what I'd always heard, but I thought it was just stories," said Smith. "Since they're supposed to be so nonviolent."

Burnbright shook her head grimly.

"*They* say it's an act of love, not violence, and their girls take it as a compliment so why shouldn't we? Self-righteous bastards. We learned all sorts of defenses against them at the mother house."

"Nice to know," said Smith. "How's Crucible's arm?"

"It's huge and it's turning all sorts of colors," she said. "I don't think he'll be able to crank tomorrow. That means you'll have to take his place. That's what Caravan Masters do."

"Oh," said Smith, who had been looking forward to a day of riding stretched out on the shipment of flour from Old Troon Mills.

"Funny about the dead glider," Burnbright said.

"What was funny about him?"

"He was from Troon." She helped him to a seat beside the fire. "I recognized him. He used to hang out at the Burning Wheel. That's the bar where all the gamblers go."

"You think Lord Ermenwyr's a gambler as well as a vampire?" Smith asked her wryly.

She flushed. "Well! I never saw him any other time but after dark until today, did you? And he never eats anything and he looks just terrible! But he's not a gambler. He's somebody's ambassador, was what I heard, and he's been called off the job because he's sick so they're sending him to the spa. I guess he really is sick. What, you think the gliders were after *him?*" She looked surprised.

"He thinks so."

"Hmmm." Her face was bright with speculation. Just then Mrs. Smith called for her, and she ran off to the kitchen pavilion.

No one slept particularly well that night. The Smiths' baby screamed for two hours instead of the usual one. Smith divided watches with the keymen, taking the first shift, so he was up late anyway, getting stiffer and more chilled before Keyman Bellows took his shift. Just as Smith had got himself drunk enough to pretend his wounded leg belonged to somebody else so he could doze off, he found himself sitting up, his heart pounding. He turned his head, staring into the west beyond the ring of carts. The faintest of touches on his face, a trace of moisture in the air, a scent as powerful and distinct as the sea's but certainly not the sea.

Across the fire from him, Mrs. Smith leaned up on one elbow in her bedroll.

"Wind's shifted," she muttered. "That's the Greenlands. We'll see it, tomorrow."

Smith lay back, wondering what she meant, and then he remembered the dark mountain.

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He had forgotten it next morning, in the haze of his hangover and the confusion of breaking camp. He took Keyman Crucible's place on the crank, and the effort of winding for the push-off alone was enough to make his biceps twinge. By the time they were three hours on their way he had mentally crossed *keyman* off the list of possible careers for himself.

Busy with all this, Smith did not glance up at the horizon until the noon meal was handed along the line, and then he saw it: a rise of forested land to the northwest, and above it a black jagged cone. It didn't seem very big until his mind grappled with a calculation of the distance. Then his eyes wouldn't accept how immense it must be.

He put it out of his mind and attempted to unwrap his lunch with one hand. It was a pocket roll stuffed with highly spiced meat. He chewed methodically, looking back along the line of cars, and wondered again what the purpose of the glider attack had been. Robbery seemed unlikely, at least of the cargo. The most valuable thing they were carrying was Lady Seven Butterflies' holistic eggs, and the mental image of a corps of gliders attempting to fly, bearing between them perhaps a cargo net full of big violet eggs, was enough to make him grin involuntarily.

What if one of the passengers had something someone else wanted? The fact that the dead man had an assassin's tattoo didn't necessarily mean he wasn't also a thief. One man may in his time take many professions, as Smith knew too well.

He looked forward at the cart where the Smiths rode. They were jewelers; were they carrying any of their wares?

He turned back to look at the cart that Parradan Smith and the Yendri shared. They rode in mutual silence. Parradan Smith watched the eastern horizon. Flowering Reed's uneasy stare was fixed on the black mountain to the northwest. Smith ruled out the Yendri, who was carrying very little luggage and had no trunks at all. His race disdained personal possessions and produced nothing anyone would want, traded in nothing but medicinal herbs and the occasional freshwater pearl.

Parradan Smith, on the other hand, was couriering something. What? The instrument case he carried didn't seem heavy enough to be loaded with gold, as Burnbright had speculated.

Which left Lord Ermenwyr. Drugs, money, jewelry: the lordling undoubtedly had plenty that would interest a thief.

Smith cranked again on the handle, scanned the sky. No wings, at least.

But the black mountain grew larger as the hours went by; and after the following day, when they came to the divide and took the northern track, it loomed directly ahead of them.

"Smith."

He opened his eyes blearily. It seemed to him he had only just closed them; but the east was getting light. He turned and looked at Mrs. Smith, who was crouching down beside him.

"We'd a visitor in the night, Smith, or so it seems. Still with us. I'd appreciate your assistance in removing it."

"What?" He sat up and stared, scratching his stubble.

She pointed with her smoking tube. He followed with his eyes and saw a mass of something on the ground in the center of camp, dimly lit by the breakfast cookfire.

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"What the hell—?" Smith crawled out and stood with effort, peering at the thing. It didn't invite close inspection, somehow, but he lurched nearer and had a good look. Then he threw up.

If you took a gray striped cat, and gave it the general size and limb configuration of a man, and then flayed it alive and scattered its flayed fur in long strips all over the corpse—you'd have something approximating what Smith saw in the pale light of dawn. You'd need to find a cat with green ichor in its veins, too, and remarkably big claws and teeth.

Smith reeled back, gasping. The thing's eyes were like beryls, still fixed in a glare of rage, but it was definitely dead.

"Oh, this is bad," he groaned.

"Could be worse," said Mrs. Smith, putting on the teakettle. "Could be you lying there with your liver torn out."

"Is its liver torn out?" Smith averted his eyes.

"Liver and heart, from the look of it. Doesn't seem to have got any of us, though. I didn't hear a thing, did you?" said Mrs. Smith quietly. Smith shook his head.

"But what is it? Is that a demon?"

"Well, there aren't any tribes of cat-headed men listed in the regional guidebooks," Mrs. Smith replied. "The principal thing with which we ought to concern ourselves just now is getting the bloody body out of sight before the guests see it, wouldn't you agree?"

"Right," said Smith, and limped away to the carts to get rope.

He made a halter and together they dragged the body away from the camp, out onto the plain. There wasn't much there to hide it. They returned and Smith found a shovel, and was going back to dig a grave when he saw the body convulse where it lay. He halted, ready to run for his life, game leg notwithstanding. The body flared green, bursting into unclean flame. It became too bright to bear looking at, throwing out a shower of green sparks, and then something brilliant rose screaming from the fire and shot upward, streaking west as though it were a comet seeking to hide itself in the last rags and shadows of the night.

The flames died away, and left nothing but black ashes blowing across the plain in the dawn wind.

"That was definitely a demon," Mrs. Smith informed him when he returned, leaning on his shovel. "Going off like a Duke's Day squib that way. They do that, you see." She handed him a tin cup of tea.

"But what was it doing here?" Smith accepted the cup and warmed his hands.

"I'm damned if I know. One doesn't usually see them this far out on the plain," said Mrs. Smith, spooning flatcake batter onto a griddle. "One can assume it came here to rend and ravage some or all of our company. One can only wonder at why it didn't succeed."

"Or who killed it," Smith added dazedly. "Or how."

"Indeed."

"Well well well, what a lovely almost-morning," said Lord Ermenwyr, emerging from his pavilion and pacing rapidly toward them. He looked slightly paler than usual and was puffing out enough smoke to obscure his features. "Really ought to rise at this hour more often. What's for breakfast?"

"Rice-and-almond-flour flatcakes with rose-apricot syrup," Mrs. Smith informed him.

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"Really," he said, staring around at the circle of tents. "How delightful. I, er, don't suppose you're serving any meat as well?"

"I could fry up sausages, my lord," said Mrs. Smith.

"Sausages? . . . Yes, I'd like that. Lots of them? Blood rare?"

"Sausages only come one way, my lord."

"Oh. They do? But what about blood sausage?"

"Even blood sausages come well-done," Mrs. Smith explained. "Not much juice in a sausage."

"Oh." For a moment Lord Ermenwyr looked for all the world as though he were going to cry. "Well—have you got any blood sausage anyway?"

"I've got some imported duck blood sausage," said Mrs. Smith.

"Duck blood?" Lord Ermenwyr seemed horrified. "All right, then—I'll have all the duck blood sausage you've got. And one of those flatcakes with lots and lots of syrup, please. And tea."

Mrs. Smith gave him a sidelong look but murmured, "Right away, my lord."

"You didn't notice anything unusual in the night, did you, my lord?" asked Smith, who had been watching him as he sipped his tea. Lord Ermenwyr turned sharply.

"Who? Me? What? No! Slept like a baby," he cried. "Why? Did something unusual happen?"

"There was a bit of unpleasantness," said Smith. "Something came lurking around."

"Horrors, what an idea! I suppose there's no way of increasing our speed so we'll be off this plain any quicker?"

"Not with one of our keymen down, I'm afraid," Smith replied.

"We'll just have to be on our guard, then, won't we?" said Lord Ermenwyr.

"You know, my lord," said Mrs. Smith as she laid out sausages on the griddle, "You needn't stand and wait for your breakfast. You can send out your nurse to fetch it for you when it's ready."

"Oh, I feel like getting my own breakfast this morning, thank you." Lord Ermenwyr flinched and bared his teeth as the Smiths' baby began the morning lamentation.

"I see," said Mrs. Smith. Smith looked at her.

He watched as, one by one, the keymen and the guests emerged from their tents alive and whole. Parradan Smith sniffed the air suspiciously, then shrugged and went off to wash himself. Burnbright crawled out of her bedroll, yawned and came over to the kitchen pavilion, where she attempted to drink rose-apricot syrup from the bottle until Mrs. Smith hit her across the knuckles with a wooden spoon. The Smith children straggled forth and went straight to the mess of green slime and strips of fur where the demon's body had been, and proceeded to poke their little fingers in it.

Ronrishim Flowering Reed stepped from his tent, saw the mess, and looked disgusted. He picked his way across the circle to the kitchen pavilion.

"Is it possible to get a cup of clean water?" he inquired. "And have you any rose extract?"

"Burnbright, fetch the nice man his water," said Mrs. Smith. "Haven't any rose extract, sir, but we do have rose-apricot syrup." Burnbright held it up helpfully.

Flowering Reed's lip curled.

"No, thank you," he said. "Plain rose extract was all I required. We are a people of simple tastes. We do not find it necessary to cloy our appetites with adulterated and excessive sensation."

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"But it's so much fun," Lord Ermenwyr told him. Flowering Reed looked at him with loathing, took his cup of water and stalked away in silence.

Lord Ermenwyr took his breakfast order, when it was ready, straight off to his palanquin and crawled inside with it. He did not emerge thereafter until it was time to break camp, when he came out himself and took down his pavilion.

"Is Madam Balnshik all right?" Smith inquired, coming to lend a hand, for the lordling was wheezing in an alarming manner.

"Just fine," Lord Ermenwyr assured him, his eyes bulging. "Be a good fellow and hold the other end of this, will you? Thanks ever so. Nursie's just got a, er, headache. The change in air pressure as we approach the highlands, no doubt. She'll be right as rain, later. You'll see."

In fact she did not emerge until they made camp that evening, though when she did she looked serene and gorgeous as ever. Mrs. Smith watched her as she dined heartily on that night's entrée, which was baked boar ham with brandied lemon-and-raisin sauce. Lord Ermenwyr, by contrast, took but a cup of consommé in his pavilion.

"That's two murder attempts," said Mrs. Smith, as the fire was going down to embers and all the guests had retired.

"You don't think it's been robbery either, then," said Smith. She exhaled a plume of smoke and shook her head.

"Not when a demon's sent," she said. "And that was a sending, depend upon it."

"I didn't think there were any sorcerers in Troon," said Smith.

"What makes you think the sending came out of Troon?" Mrs. Smith inquired, looking dubious. He told her about Burnbright's recognizing the dead glider. She just nodded.

"You don't think the two attacks are unrelated, do you?" asked Smith. "Do you think the demon might have been sent by—" He gestured out into the darkness, toward the black mountain. Mrs. Smith was silent a moment.

"Not generally his style," she said at last. "But I suppose anything's possible. That would certainly complicate matters."

"I like trouble to be simple," said Smith. "Let's say it's somebody in Troon. It's my guess they're either after Parradan Smith or the little lord. Couldn't get them in town without it being an obvious murder, so they waited until we were far enough out on the plain that we couldn't send for help. Eh?"

"Seems reasonable."

"But the first attack didn't come off, thanks to there being a lot more people able to fight back here than they bargained for," Smith theorized. "Now we're getting further out of range and they're getting desperate, so they hired somebody to send a demon. That costs a lot. I'm betting they've run out of resources. I'm betting we'll be left in peace from here on."

And for the next two days it seemed as though he might be right, though the journey was not without incident. The Smith children began to grow gray fur on their hands, and nothing—not shaving, not plucking, not depilatory cream—could remove it. Moreover it began to spread, to their parents' consternation, and by nightfall of the second day they sat like a trio of miserable kittens while their mother had hysterics and pleaded with Smith to do something about it.

Such commotion she made that Lord Ermenwyr ventured from his bed,

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glaring and demanding silence; though when he saw the children he howled with immoderate laughter, and Balnshik had to come drag him back inside, scolding him severely. She came out later and offered a salve that looked like terra-cotta clay, which proved effective in removing the fur, though the children wept and whined that it stung.

Still, by the next morning the fur had not grown back.

They were leaving the plain at last, now, and the Greenlands rose before them in range upon range of wooded hills. Above and beyond them towered the black mountain, so vast it seemed like another world in itself, perhaps one orbiting dangerously close. Its separate topography, its dark forests and valleys, its cliffs brightened here and there by the fall of glittering rivers and rainbowed mists, all became more distinct with every hour and seemed less real.

The going was harder here, too, for though the road skirted the hills in most places the ground did climb, and the keymen hauled and strained at the cranks, and Smith worked so hard his wound opened again and Keyman Crucible had to come help him, pumping one-handed. The air was moist, full of the smell of green things, and when they made camp their first evening in a tree-circled glade there was no least taste of the dust of Troon left in anyone's mouth.

Two days into the Greenlands, they were attacked again.

They had scaled a hill with sweating effort, and cresting saw a long straight slope before them, stretching down to a gentle shaded run through oaks beginning to go golden and red. Burnbright whooped with relief, and sprinted down the road before the caravan as it came rattling after. The Smith children raised a shrill cheer as the carts picked up speed, and bright leaves whirled in the breeze as they came down.

But near the bottom of the incline, there were suddenly a great many leaves, and acorns too, and then there was an entire tree across the road. A very large and fairly ugly man stepped out and stood before them, grinning.

He was doing it for effect, of course. He had the sashes, the golden earring, the daggers that went with a bandit, and he had moreover the tusks and thundercloud skin color that went with a demon hybrid. There was no need for him to shout, "Halt! This is an armed robbery!" and with his tusks he might have found it a little difficult to enunciate anyway. His job was to terrify and demoralize the caravan, and he was well suited for it.

However, it is not a good idea to terrify a little girl whose legs can run fifty miles in a day without resting. Burnbright screamed but, unable to stop for her momentum, did what had been drummed into her at the Mount Flame Mother House for Runners: she leaped into the air and came on heels-first, straight into the bandit's face. He went over with a crash and she went with him, landing on her feet. She proceeded to dance frenziedly on his head, as behind her the carts derailed and before her other bandits came howling from the forest.

Nor is it a good idea to lose the element of surprise. Smith and the others had enough warning, in the time they were hurtling toward the tree, to prepare themselves, and when the moment of impact came they were poised to leap clear. Smith landed hard on his hip but got off a pair of bolts into the bandit who was rushing him, which bought him enough time to scramble to his feet and draw his machete. The keymen had produced dented-looking

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bucklers and machetes from nowhere, and charged now in formation, a pot-headed wall of slightly rusty steel.

One of the bolts had got Smith's opponent in the throat, so he was able to cut him down in a moment. As he swung to meet another shrieking assailant he had a glimpse of the tumbled caravan. The Smiths were desperately attempting to get their children into the shelter of an overturned cart, and a bandit who was advancing on them found his head abruptly caved in by a heavy skillet wielded by Mrs. Smith. Giant violet eggs were rolling everywhere, spilling free of their cargo netting, and Balnshik was kicking them aside as she leaped forward, a stiletto blade in either hand. She slashed at a bandit who backed rapidly from her, though whether he was intimidated more by the wicked little knives or the gleam of her white teeth, bared in a snarl of bloodthirsty joy, it would have been difficult to say.

Lord Ermenwyr, astonishingly, was up and on his feet, and had just taken off an assailant's head with a saber. Parradan Smith had emptied his pistolbows, mowing down at least five attackers, and was locked in a hand-to-hand struggle with the sixth. This was all Smith was able to see clearly before he became far too preoccupied with his own survival to look longer.

His opponent was not, as the tusked bandit had been, hideous. He was lithe, slender, beautiful; but for the ram's horns that curved back from his temples and the fact that his skin was the color of lightning, he might have graced any boy-prostitute's couch in the most elegant of cities. This did not impress Smith, but the youth fought like a demon too, and that painfully impressed him.

Blade blocked blade—whip, a dagger was in the youth's free hand, and he'd laid open Smith's coat just over his heart. He smiled into Smith's eyes and lunged again, and Smith, jumping back, was unable to free his boot-knife before they locked blades once more. The boy had all the advantage of inhuman strength and elasticity, and Smith began to get the cold certain feeling in his gut that he was going down this time.

All he had on the boy was weight, and he threw it into a forward push. He managed to shove the other one back far enough to grab his knife at last and they circled, the boy dancing, Smith limping. He knew vaguely that the bandits were getting the worst of the fight, but they might have been in another world. His world was that locked circle, tiny and growing smaller, and his opponent's eyes had become the moon and the sun.

The demon-boy knew he was going to win, too, and in his glee threw a few little eccentric capers into his footwork, strutted heel-to-toe, swung his dagger-point like a metronome to catch Smith's gaze and fix it while he ran him through—

But he didn't run him through, because his own gaze was caught and held by a figure advancing from Smith's right.

"Hello, Eshbysse," said Mrs. Smith.

The boy's face went slack with astonishment. Into his eyes came uncertainty, and then dawning horror.

"Yes," said Mrs. Smith. "Fenallise."

He drew back. "Fenallise? But—you—"

"It's been thirty years, Eshbysse," she said.

"No!" he cried, backing further away. "Not that long! You're lying." Averting his gaze from her, he dropped his weapons and put his hands to his face. It was still smooth, still perfect.

"Every day of thirty years," she assured him.

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"I won't believe you!" Eshbysse sobbed. He turned to flee, wailing, mounting into the air and running along the treetops, and the red and golden leaves fluttered about his swift ankles as though they had already fallen. His surviving men, seeing the tide had turned, took to their heels along the ground with similar rapidity.

Smith dropped his weapons and sagged forward, bracing his hands on his thighs, gulping for breath.

"What the hell," he said, "was that all about?"

"We were an item, once," said Mrs. Smith, looking away into the sea of autumn leaves. "You wouldn't think I was ever a little girl to be stolen out of a convent by a demon lover, would you? But we did terrible things together, he and I."

"What'd he run off for?" asked Smith.

She shook her head.

"He was always afraid of Time," she said thoughtfully. "It doesn't get their kind as quickly as it gets us, but it does do for them sooner or later. Seeing me reminded him. One day he won't be pretty any more; he can't bear that, you see."

Smith stared at her, and saw in her face the girl she had been. She turned and looked at the aftermath of battle.

"Bloody hell," she said. Parradan Smith was staggering toward them, death-pale, supported by Flowering Reed.

"He's hurt," Flowering Reed cried.

They made temporary camp by the side of the road and assessed the damage.

Parradan Smith was indeed hurt, had taken a stab wound in the chest, and though it was nowhere near his heart he was in shock, seemed weakened on his left side. Flowering Reed advised that he shouldn't be moved for the present time, so they made him as comfortable as they could in one of the tents.

Burnbright was bruised and crying hysterically, but had taken no other harm. Smith's ribs were scratched, and the keymen had taken assorted cuts, none serious. The Smiths and their children were unharmed. Balnshik was unharmed, as was Lord Ermenwyr. There were, however, nine dead bandits to be dragged into a pile and searched, and there was an oak tree to be cleared from the road, to say nothing of one hundred and forty-four giant eggs to be collected and a dozen carts to be righted and put back on track.

"So thanks a lot, Master of the Mountain," Smith muttered, as he was having his ribs taped up. Mrs. Smith, who was tending to him, shook her head.

"Have you taken a good look at the bodies?" she asked. "Three of 'em are our own people. The others look like half-breeds. Poor Eshbysse had got himself a band of threadbare mercenaries and thieves. When the old man attacks, you'll know; his people are all demons, and a good deal more professional than these feckless creatures. We'd have had no chance at all against him."

"That's encouraging," growled Smith.

"Would you believe it?" said Lord Ermenwyr brightly, approaching with an armful of violet eggs. "Not one of the damned things broke!"

Mrs. Smith looked scornful. "I suppose all that tripe about the perfect holistic packing shape had some sense in it, then."

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"Are they supposed to be a perfect holistic shape?" Lord Ermenwyr looked intrigued. He tossed his armful into the air and, before Smith had time to yell, began to juggle them adroitly. "How very strange. I'd always supposed they were only that shape because, well, otherwise they'd never get out of the female, would they? Pyramids or blocks, how dreadfully uncomfortable! Certainly I'd go on strike—"

"My lord, could I ask you to put those back in the cart?"

"And then I'd doubtless go extinct, so it's just as well I'm a male, isn't it?" Lord Ermenwyr tossed the eggs, one after another as they came out of their spinning circle, into the cart. "Shall I volunteer to search the bodies? They look a pretty scabby lot, but you never know. Might be a purse or two on them."

"At least they don't seem to have been from the Master of the Mountain," said Smith.

"What, these?" Lord Ermenwyr gave a short bark of a laugh. "Not likely! Not a decent piece of armor in the lot. *His* men all wear mail and livery. Or so I've heard."

"Why does everybody seem to know more about this than me?" Smith wondered, watching as the young lord went off to loot corpses.

"Well, you're not from around here, are you, dear?" Mrs. Smith tied off his bandage. "If you weren't from Port Blackrock or wherever it is, you'd have heard these stories all your life."

Smith was disinclined to tell her whether or not he was from Port Blackrock, so he looked up at Keyman Bellows, who saluted as he approached. "How are we doing?" he inquired.

"Carts are righted, Caravan Master, and no damage to the wheels or gears. Smith and Smith are taking axes to the road block now. Parradan Smith's asking for you."

"Right," Smith said, getting to his feet and pulling on his slashed coat. "I'll go see what he wants. When they're done with the tree, tell them to dig a pit grave."

His first thought, when he parted the tent flap and peered inside, was that he was looking at a dead man. But Parradan Smith's eyes swiveled and met his.

"Talk to you," he said.

"He shouldn't talk," said Flowering Reed, who sat beside him. Parradan Smith bared his teeth at the Yendri.

"Get out," he said.

"Easy!" Smith ducked his head and stepped in. "You'd better go; I won't let him wear himself out," he told Flowering Reed, who looked offended and left without a word.

When they were alone, Parradan Smith gestured awkwardly with one hand at the gang tattoo on his chest. "Know this?" he gasped.

"You're a Bloodfire," Smith replied.

He nodded. "Courier. Collected debt in Troon. He tried to get it back."

"Who did?" Smith leaned closer. Parradan Smith gulped for breath.

"Lord Tinwick. Gambler. His gliders." He watched Smith's face closely to see if he understood.

"The gliders were trying to kill you and take back what you'd collected?"

Parradan Smith nodded. He made a groping gesture toward his instrument case. Smith pulled it close for him. He pressed a key into Smith's hand.

"Open."

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Smith worked the complicated locks and opened it, and caught his breath. Nested in shaped packing was a jeweled cup, of exquisite workmanship, clearly very old.

"Heirloom. All he had to pay with. My lord wants it bad. You deliver—" Parradan Smith looked up into Smith's eyes. "And tell him. Pay well. Lord Kashban Beatbrass. Villa in Salesh. Find him."

A shadow shifted across the outside of the tent and moved away. Parradan Smith followed it with his eyes, and smiled bitterly.

"He stopped listening," he said.

"Look, you aren't wounded that badly," said Smith, feeling he ought to say something encouraging. "I'm sure we can get you to Salesh."

Parradan Smith looked back at him.

"Turn me," he ordered.

"What?" said Smith, but he obeyed, lifting and half-turning the wounded man. He caught his breath; there was a red swelling on his back like an insect bite but immense, beginning to blister, and in its center a dark speck.

"See?" said Parradan Smith, breathing very hard. "Poisoned."

Smith said something profane. He drew his knife and scraped gently, and the black thing came out of the wound. He turned Parradan Smith on his back again and held up the object on his knife blade, squinting at it. It looked like the tip of a thorn, perhaps a quarter of an inch long.

"This is like those darts we took out of the glider," he said.

"In my back," said Parradan Smith. Smith groaned.

"Somebody in the party shot you," he said. "Maybe by accident?"

Parradan Smith looked impatient, and drew a deep breath as though he was about to explain something too obvious to Smith; but he never drew another breath after that, and lay staring at Smith with blank eyes.

Smith sighed. He closed and locked the case. Flowering Reed approached him as he came out of the tent, and he told him:

"He's dead."

"He might have lived if you'd listened to me," said the Yendri angrily.

"I don't think so," said Smith, and walked away to put the case in a safe place.

A while later he approached Lord Ermenwyr, who was puffing out rifts of purple smoke as he watched the keymen digging the grave-pit.

"We need to talk, my lord," he said.

"My master needs to rest," said Balnshik, appearing beside him, as from thin air.

"I need to talk to him more than he needs to rest," said Smith stubbornly. Lord Ermenwyr waved a placatory hand.

"Certainly we'll talk, and Nursie can stand by with a long knife in case things take an unpleasant turn," he said. "Though I think we've seen the last of this particular band of cutthroats."

"Let's hope so, my lord," said Smith, drawing him aside. Balnshik followed closely, tossing her hair back in an insolent kind of way. Her shirt had been torn in the fight, giving him a peep at breasts like pale melons, and it was with difficulty that he drew his attention back to her young master. "You fought very well, if I may say so."

"You may," said Lord Ermenwyr smugly. "But then, I've had lots of experience fighting for my life. Usually against doctors. Today was a welcome change."

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"Your health seems to have improved."

"I'm no longer rusticating in that damned dust-bowl, am I?" Lord Ermenwyr blew a smoke ring. "Bandits or no, the Greenlands does offer fresh air."

"What were you doing in Troon?" inquired Smith. Balnshik stretched extravagantly, causing one nipple to flash like a dark star through the rent in her shirt. Smith turned his face away and concentrated on Lord Ermenwyr, who replied:

"Why, I was about my father's business. Representing his interests, if you must know, with Old Troon Mills and the other barley barons. Doing a damned good job, too, before the Lung Rot set in."

"Do you gamble, my lord?"

"Hell, no." Lord Ermenwyr scowled. "A pastime for morons, unless you've got an undetectable way of cheating. I don't need the money and I certainly don't need the thrill of suspense, thank you very much. I've spent too much of my life wondering if I'd live to see my next birthday."

Smith nodded. "And the only reason you left Troon was for your health?"

"Yes."

"You'd made no new enemies there?"

Lord Ermenwyr's eyes glinted. "I didn't say that," he purred. "Though it wasn't my fault, really. I made the most amazing discovery."

"Master," said Balnshik, in the gentlest voice imaginable, but it was still a warning.

"Did you know," said Lord Ermenwyr, with barely-suppressed glee, "that if you're very attentive to wealthy widows, they'll practically pay you to sleep with them? They'll give you presents! They'll take you nice places to eat! Good lord, I might have been a kitten on a string, and all I had to do was—"

"I'm sure the Caravan Master isn't interested, my lord," said Balnshik, putting an affectionate arm about his neck and locking it against his windpipe.

"How old is he?" Smith asked her.

"Sixteen."

"Twenty-five!" said Lord Ermenwyr, pushing back her arm. "Really!"

"Sixteen," Balnshik repeated.

"Seventeen," Lord Ermenwyr insisted. "Anyway, the only problem is, the ladies get jealous and they won't share their toy. There was a Scene. A certain lady tried to do me an injury with her hairbrush. I only got out of it by pretending to have a seizure, and then I told her I was dying, which I am but not right then, and—"

"And his lord father thought it best my master have a change of air," Balnshik finished for him.

Smith rubbed his chin, scratching the stubble.

"So . . . would any of these ladies have felt strongly enough to hire a band of mercenaries to ambush you out here?" he said, without much hope.

"Well, I don't know—Lady Fristia was rather—"

"No," said Balnshik. "And now, I hope you'll excuse us? It's time his lordship had his drugs." She lifted Lord Ermenwyr bodily, threw him over her shoulder and carried him off protesting:

"It could have been Lady Fristia, you know! She was obsessed with me—"

They buried Parradan Smith in a separate grave, and piled a cairn of stones to mark it, on Burnbright's advice, she being the nearest expert on Mount Flame City gang customs. They felt badly leaving him there, in the

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shadow of the black mountain. Still, there is only so much one can do for the dead without joining them.

Two days more they rolled on, fearful at every blind turning, but the fire-colored forest was silent under a mild blue sky. No picturesque villains jumped out from behind the mossy boles nor arose from the green ferns.

On the third day, Crucible, who was working the crank with Smith, told him:

"We'll come to a Red House today. Might want their blacksmith to have a look at that rear axle."

"Red House, right," said Smith, nodding as he pumped. "That would be one of the way station chain? I saw one on the map. Well, that'll be a relief."

Crucible laughed like a crow. "You haven't tasted their beer," he said.

By afternoon, when the long shadows were slanting behind the oaks, they saw the Red House. It stood on a bluff above the road, in a meadow cleared and stump-dotted, with high windowless walls of red plaster turreted at the four corners where watchmen in pot-helmets leaned. Burnbright announced the caravan's approach on her trumpet, but they had already seen it from afar. By the time the keymen slowed for the turnout, the great gates were already opening.

Fortified as it was, an effort had been made to give the Red House a welcoming appearance. There was a quaint slated mansard built above the gate, bearing a sign of red glass that was illuminated after hours by lanterns: JOIN US, HAPPY TRAVELER, it said. On either gatepost were carved the massive figures of folk heroes Prashkon the Wrestler and Andib the Axman, scowling down in a way that might be hoped to frighten off demons or any other ill-intentioned lurkers without the gates. As if that were not enough, the Housekeeper himself came running forward as the carts rattled in, screaming "Welcome! Welcome to Red House, customers!"

"Thank you," said Smith cautiously, climbing from his cart and staring around. They were circled in an open courtyard of herringbone brick. To one side a high-vaulted hall stood, with blue smoke curling from its big central chimney. Built into the opposite wall were other long rooms: they might be storerooms and barracks for the watchmen. There was also a forge with a fire blazing, throwing on the dark wall the darker shadow of the blacksmith, who was clanging away lazily at a bit of glowing iron.

"You'd be out of Troon, Caravan Master, am I correct?" asked the Housekeeper, coming up to slap Smith's arm heartily. He winced.

"That's right," he replied. "And it hasn't been an easy trip. We've been attacked twice. No, three times, and lost a passenger."

"Ah! Demons, was it?" The Housekeeper shuddered. "Horrible, horrible! But you'll be all right here. We're a bright speck of safety in a hostile land. Salves for your wounds and cheer for your heart. Everything for the traveler. Smithy, trading post with unique curios, dining hall with fine cuisine, splendid accommodations! Even baths. No shortage of water. You'll dine with me, I trust?"

"Yes, thank you." Smith glanced at the caravan, but the keymen were already wheeling the lead cart to the forge, covering the cargo and locking things down with practiced efficiency. "Hot baths for everybody first, though, I guess. Have you got a doctor here? Some of us are wounded, and there's a Yendri passenger who's helped out a little, but—"

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"As it happens," said the Housekeeper, lowering his voice, "Our medic is a Yendri. You won't mind him, I promise you. Splendid fellow, knows his place, expert in all kinds of secret remedies his people use. Eminently trustworthy. Many of them are, you know. We've had him here for years. Never a mishap. I'll send him to you in the bathhouse, shall I?"

The last thing Smith wanted at that moment was to have to deal with another supercilious green person, but his leg hurt badly, so he just nodded and said, "Great."

He was sitting in a long stone trough full of hot water, wishing it was deep enough to submerge himself, when the Yendri doctor entered the narrow stall and edged toward him. Like Flowering Reed, he was tall and regal-looking; but he wore a simple white robe, and did not seem quite so superior.

"You are the wounded man?" he inquired, setting down a basket.

"It's mostly me," said Smith, sitting upright. "But the keymen are more important. They've got some bad gashes. In the name of the Unsullied Daughter, will you patch them up?"

The Yendri raised his eyebrows. "For the sake of the Unwearied Mother," he said, laying a peculiar emphasis on the title, "they have been tended to. They asked me to see you next. You took a bolt in the leg?"

Smith nodded, raising his leg from the water. The Yendri hissed softly when he saw the bolt wound.

"This is inflamed. Dry yourself and step out to the massage table, please."

He retreated, and Smith got hastily from the tub and toweled himself off. When he emerged from the stall, he saw that the Yendri had laid out a number of unpleasant-looking tools and bottles.

"You could just slap some salve and a bandage on it," he suggested uneasily.

"Not if you wish to keep your leg," the Yendri replied, helping him up on the table. Smith lay back and gritted his teeth, and for the next few minutes thought very hard about a cozy little bar in a seaside town, where from a window table one could watch blue dusk settling on the harbor, and the yellow lamps blooming one after another on the ships and along the peaceful quay. . . .

After far too long a time the Yendri was applying a bandage, and telling him:

"The cut on your thorax will heal easily, but you'll have to keep the leg elevated. Can they make a pallet for you on one of the carts?"

"I think so," said Smith, unclenching his jaw with effort. "It was just a flesh wound. Did you really have to dig like that?"

"It had become—" the Yendri paused in tying off the bandage and looked at him. "Hm. Let me explain it like this: there are tiny demons who feed on wounds. They're so tiny you can't see them, but they can get into a cut and make you very, very sick, do you understand?"

Smith thought it sounded like the most idiotic superstition, but he nodded. "Tiny demons. All right. What's keeping my leg up supposed to do?"

"Well, there are—hm—tiny warriors in your heart, you see? And they'll do battle with the demons if they can get to them, but if you constrict the—hm—the river of your blood so they can't row their tiny warships along it—" The Yendri, observing Smith's expression, threw his hands in the air. "Let's just say you need to keep off your feet and rest, will that do? And perhaps it won't scar too badly."

"I'm too old to care about scars," said Smith, rubbing his leg.

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"You're fortunate, then," said the Yendri, eyeing him critically. "Given the number you've got. You're a mercenary, I take it?"

"Have been," said Smith warily.

"You've survived a great deal. You must be sensible enough to follow a doctor's advice." The Yendri bundled up his instruments.

"I'll do my best," said Smith. "Thank you. Thanks for being polite, too. Flowering Reed sounded like he hoped I'd die, even when he was putting on the bandage."

The Yendri looked at him sharply. "Another of my people treated you?"

"He's one of our passengers."

"Hm. Would that be where you learned the expression 'Unsullied Daughter,' by any chance?"

"Yes. I thought it was something we had to say so you'd treat us."

"No," said the Yendri quietly. "Any true follower of the lady in question must heal the sick and the wounded, whether or not they invoke her name. And regardless of who they are. Good evening, Caravan Master."

He took his basket and left. Smith pulled on his clothes and limped out of the bathhouse. It was twilight, with one star in a purple sky above the red walls, and the firelight from the forge threw his tottering shadow out black beside him as he made his way across the courtyard to the high hall.

"Caravan Master!" cried the Housekeeper, descending on him with a drink in either hand. "Come, sit with me. Your bath was enjoyable, yes, and you've had your leg seen to? Excellent. You'll enjoy a complimentary beverage and our unique regional cuisine while relaxing around the blazing warmth of our fire."

"Sounds wonderful," said Smith dazedly.

He let himself be led to a seat by the central fire-pit, and sank into it with a grateful sigh, as a drink was pressed into his hand. Utter bliss. His state of euphoria lasted until he took a sip of his drink.

"What—what's this?" he gasped, turning to the Housekeeper in disbelief.

"That's our special acorn beer," said the Housekeeper, a little defensively. "It's made nowhere else. We don't even brew enough to export."

"It's very unusual," said Smith.

"You'd really like it if you had a chance to get used to it," the Housekeeper told him. "It has a marvelous subtle complex bouquet."

Like a burning barn, thought Smith. He swirled the flat sour stuff and said, "Delicate carbonation, too."

"Exactly," the Housekeeper said, and drank heartily. "None of your nasty gassy flatlands ale!" He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and leaned toward Smith with a gleam in his eye. "Though I'm always interested in news from the flatlands, you understand. We've got almost everything here—fresh air, fine water, radiant health—of course it's a little dismaying at first, always looking over one's shoulder at the, er, mountain up there, but one soon grows used to that—still, we're a little out of touch, I have to admit. Almost miss the flatlands, sometimes."

"Really," said Smith, having another mouthful of his beer in the hope that it would improve upon acquaintance. It didn't.

"Yes," said the Housekeeper, staring into the fire. "Not so much at this time of year—the forest isn't so bad, the leaves look like flames now and soon the branches will be bare so you can *see* things, good clean honest open spaces. Not like in summer when there's this smothering blanket of impen-

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etrable green and anything could be hiding out there, anything could steal up behind you and—one gets a little edgy in the summer, yes. Demon country, after all."

Smith nodded. "Do you get attacked much?"

"Attacked? No, no, not in here, this is a fine safe outpost. The odd demon over the wall now and again, but I think they're only after our beer."

Smith thought that very unlikely indeed.

"One just doesn't want to venture outside the walls, into all that—green," said the Housekeeper, and shuddered. "Well! Tell me of your travels, Caravan Master. Tell me the news of Troon."

Smith obliged, for the next quarter of an hour, and while he talked he surveyed the high hall. Other guests of the Red House, a mixed lot of Children of the Sun, Yendri and unclassifiable half-breeds, sat here and there eating, or drinking, or settling down for the night.

Across the fire-pit, the keymen were lined up on a long settle, basking in the warmth in happy mutual silence. In the dining area, Mrs. Smith and Burnbright were sitting at a table, though they were not eating: Mrs. Smith had pushed away her laden trencher and sat smoking furiously, glaring at it. Burnbright was sawing away at a piece of meat with great difficulty. So formidable did it seem to be that it slipped out of the trencher now and then, and had to be stabbed and dragged back by main force.

In the quiet area at the back of the hall, the Smiths had made up a couple of beds and the children sat upright in one, chattering like starlings, while their mother rocked the screaming baby in the other and their father attempted to erect a makeshift curtain to screen them from the firelight. Other guests, having bedded down for the night, were rising now and then on their elbows to look threateningly at the little family.

Ronrishim Flowering Reed sat alone at a table, a carafe of something that looked like rainwater in front of him. Smith gazed at it longingly and rinsed his mouth with more of the beer. As he gave detailed descriptions of all the costumes he'd seen at Troon's Festival of Masks to the Housekeeper, Smith observed a hooded stranger rise from a seat in the shadows and approach Flowering Reed.

The stranger leaned over him and said something in a low voice. Flowering Reed looked interested, made reply. The stranger sat down across from him and, taking out a long rolled envelope of supple leather, spread it open on the table to display some kind of small wares packed inside.

"But the ladies," said the Housekeeper, "Tell me about the ladies in Troon. I dream about sophisticated feminine graces, you know, day in, day out, as the caravans come and go. Ladies and their brocades. Their perfumes. Their tiny little jeweled sandals. Their refined accents!"

"Don't have the bloody Mixed Grill plate, whatever you do," muttered Mrs. Smith out of the corner of her mouth, dropping heavily into a chair beside Smith. "It's unspeakably horrid." She stuffed more weed into her smoking tube and, leaning forward, lit it from the fire-pit.

"I always thought inland men had lots of Yendri mistresses," said Smith to the Housekeeper. "Or half-demonesses or something. Wild forest girls who won't keep their clothes on, with knockers like . . ." Words failed him, as an image of Balnshik's bosom rose before his eyes.

"Don't tell *me* that thing was a kidney," Mrs. Smith growled, exhaling a cloud of smoke. "Grilled handball is more like it. And those creamed woodpeas! What business have they got employing the services of an incompe-

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tent who can't even produce a palatable white sauce, that's what I'd like to know?"

The Housekeeper was shaking his head sadly. "Oh, Caravan Master, I can see you're a stranger to the Greenlands. The Yendri women keep to themselves. As for any wild forest girls, well, first you've got to persuade them to bathe on a regular basis, and then you'd better keep a weapon under your pillow. And when you've had the bad luck to take up with one who's got some shapeshifting blood! No, no; one soon learns that a female and a lady are not necessarily one and the same. How I crave the sight of a real lady! The delicate ankles. The gauzy underthings. The cosmetics—" He had to pause to wipe saliva from the corner of his mouth.

"Ladies," said Smith to the Housekeeper. "Well—We're carrying cargo for Lady Seven Butterflies."

"Seven Butterflies!" The Housekeeper was ecstatic. "What a charming name. Is she delicate and fair, as it suggests?"

"I guess so," said Smith, remembering the mask with its black tongue. "I couldn't see her very well for her costume. But it was a pretty costume." He was distracted as Balnshik entered the high hall, evidently fresh from the bath. Her damp shirt clung to her breasts that stood up proudly, as she carried on her head an elaborate construction of wood and canvas, with both hands up to steady it.

Behind her Lord Ermenwyr strutted, with his wet hair curling over the lace collar of his long nightshirt. He wore embroidered slippers and a matching nightcap, and carried a bedroll. His long smoking tube was still clenched between his teeth.

Balnshik selected a suitably remote section of the hall and set down her burden. In a moment she had it all unfolded and standing: a camp cot of ingenious design, complete with its own attached insect-tent of gauzy netting, surmounted by a gilded cherub blowing a tiny trumpet. At least, it looked like a cherub. Was that a tiny tail it sported? Lord Ermenwyr passed her the bedroll and as Balnshik leaned between the curtains to arrange it on the cot, he wandered over to the fire.

"Good evening, all," he said, puffing out a great rift of purple smoke that mingled a moment with Mrs. Smith's white fumes, turning a sickly lavender before vanishing up the draft of the firehood. "Splendid baths, Housekeeper. Not quite deep enough to have satisfying sex in, but all the hot water one could ask for."

"And this young man would be?" inquired the Housekeeper, mildly affronted.

"This is Lord Ermenwyr of the House Kingfisher," Smith explained, and the Housekeeper leaped to his feet.

"My lord! Honor, honor, all possible honor to your house! Delighted to receive you at Red House. Please, here's a cushion, sit by the fire. A drink for the lord," he shouted to the bar.

"Er—he's very young," said Smith. "And an invalid besides. I don't think beer would be a good idea."

"Oh, if he's an invalid he must try our acorn beer," said the Housekeeper earnestly, settling Lord Ermenwyr in his own chair and arranging pillows around him. "It's got plenty of health-giving qualities. Very tonic. And, begging your pardon, Caravan Master, but any fellow with a beard is surely old enough for strong waters."

"Of course I am," said Ermenwyr complacently. "Pray, Caravan Master,

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don't trouble yourself. Is this the famous acorn beer?" He accepted a cup from the slavey who had hastened up to present it to him. "Thank you so much. To your good health, Housekeeper," he said, and drank.

Smith cringed inwardly, watching as Lord Ermenwyr's eyes popped wide. He swallowed, bared his teeth, turned the grimace into a fearsome smile and said:

"How original. I wonder—could I purchase a barrel of this stuff? It'd make a perfect gift for my older brothers."

Tears of joy formed in the Housekeeper's eyes. "Oh! The honor you do us! My lord, it's in short supply, but for you—"

"Name your price," said Lord Ermenwyr.

"Please, accept it as a gift! And grant only that I may claim the honor of your patronage," gushed the Housekeeper. Lord Ermenwyr frowned at that, and some of the glittering nastiness went out of his eyes.

"You have my patronage," he said seriously. "There. See that a barrel is packed with my trunks before we leave."

The Housekeeper twittered so that Smith was afraid he was going to flap his arms and fly into the rafters. Mrs. Smith watched the scene in disbelief until Burnbright came wandering up forlornly.

"I can't find my bedroll," she said. "I think one of those strangers took it. Come help me look."

"They won't rape you, for heaven's sake," said Mrs. Smith. "Not with all these people here anyway."

"But they look like bandits," whined Burnbright, twisting her hands together. "Please?"

Grumbling and puffing smoke, Mrs. Smith hauled herself out of her chair and stamped off with Burnbright. At this moment the Yendri doctor entered, carrying his basket, making for the dining area where a guest was doubled up with indigestion. Smith nodded at the doctor, who did not notice, because his eyes were tracking across the room as he walked. He spotted Flowering Reed. Smith thought he looked disgusted, and wondered briefly if the Yendri disliked one another as much as they seemed to dislike all other races.

The doctor's gaze slid off Flowering Reed and he turned to go on, but paused again as he saw Lord Ermenwyr, who was laughing at something the Housekeeper had just said and tilting back his head to blow a smoke ring. The doctor halted, stared a long moment before going on to his patient.

Smith's attention was drawn away as a slavey came bustling up with a tray.

"Your supper at last, Caravan Master," said the Housekeeper. "I'm proud to present our local specialty: Huntsman's Mixed Grill with creamed woodpeas!"

"Oh. Thank you," said Smith. He sat straight, putting his drink aside gladly, and accepted a trencher and a rolled napkin full of utensils from the slavey. As he looked around for a place to set one of them down, he saw out of the corner of his eye the hooded man staring at him. He turned to meet his gaze. The man jumped to his feet, starting toward him.

"You! You're the Caravan Master. Those are your people, right? Can't you tell them to shut their damned baby up?"

"Well—I can try, but—" said Smith, awkwardly juggling utensils and thinking that the stranger was yelling louder than the baby.

"Wait a minute. I know you from somewhere," announced the stranger, raising his voice even more as he approached. "You're that damned thief they were looking for in Karkateen this summer!"

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"What?" Smith gaped at the stranger, who had come up on him so rapidly they were now face to face. "No. You're mistaken. I've never been in Karkateen—"

"Are you calling me a liar?" shouted the stranger. His arm flashed out and Smith's trencher went flying as he tried to fend him off, but there was no weapon in the stranger's hand. Instead there was a small bag of purple-dyed leather palmed there, and the stranger made a snatching motion at Smith's belt and held up the bag as though he'd just pulled it loose. "This is mine! Damn you, here's my mark on it!"

But he played the game a second too long, holding up the bag in righteous indignation for all to behold, because Smith saw him going for his knife with his other hand. This gave Smith time to drive his fork into the stranger's leg and roll forward out of his chair, under the stranger's guard. He came up behind him as the stranger was turning, and hip-checked him so he fell forward across Smith's empty chair with a crash.

"I'm not a thief, I'm not from Karkateen, and I didn't take that pouch from you because you had it in your hand the whole time," Smith babbled, drawing both his pistolbows and stepping back. "What the hell's going on?"

But even as the stranger turned, yanking the fork from his leg with a murderous glare, Smith knew what was going on. Burnbright, over in the sleeping area, screamed as four shadowy figures leaped to their feet and came forward. Surprisingly for men who had retired to their blankets, each was fully clothed and armed with a cocked pistolbow.

Smith gulped and retreated a pace further, as the foremost stranger drew his knife and hurled it at him. Smith dodged the blade and fired both bolts straight into the stranger's chest, and couldn't imagine why the man looked as surprised as he did when he fell.

Then there were bolts whistling through the air toward him, and Smith threw himself flat behind a table and chairs, and heard the bolts plunking home into wood and into plaster, and heard more screams and inarticulate shouting, loudest of which was the Housekeeper calling for his watchmen.

Reloading, Smith peered through table and chair legs and saw that Lord Ermenwyr had sensibly thrown a table down and got behind it on his hands and knees. Balnshik was in the act of flying to him, bounding over the scattered furniture. Smith leaned up to see where his assailants were and beheld to his astonishment that one was down, tackled from behind by Mrs. Smith and Burnbright, who were shrieking like mismatched furies and clubbing him on the head with trenchers. The keymen had as one risen to their feet, grabbed a wide settle and made a shield of it as they blocked two of the other attackers.

Here came the fourth man, however, reloading as he ran, evading the keymen and actually vaulting across the fire-pit to get to Smith. Smith jumped up, kicking a stool toward the man to foul his legs as he landed, and the stranger managed to avoid the stool but stumbled on his fallen companion. Smith fired at him, one bolt skittering off into the debris and one smacking home into the man's side.

His assailant cursed, but lurched to his feet anyway and drew a short sword. He stood swaying, waving it at Smith, though his face was ashen. Smith grabbed up the stool and swung it at the man, knocking the sword out of his fingers. Another blow with the stool and the man collapsed backward, bleeding from his mouth.

Smith backed away, hearing a commotion behind him that was perhaps

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the arrival of the Red House watchmen. He looked up and was amazed to see that the two remaining strangers had turned from the keymen and were engaging Balnshik, attempting to pinion her. They weren't succeeding very well, in fact Smith heard the distinctive sound of snapping bone and a gibbering scream from one of the men; but they had successfully drawn her attention.

Behind her, Flowering Reed was moving quietly along the wall. His face looked odd. Was that something in his mouth? And what a strange look in his eyes, too, fixed as they were on Lord Ermenwyr, who was making himself as small a target behind his table as he could, and whose lips were moving in—prayer? But he could not see Flowering Reed advancing on him.

Smith knew the truth, suddenly, without understanding. Bawling "My lord!" he ran around the table to block Flowering Reed's advance, pulling his machete.

Something white was flowing toward him from his left with tremendous speed. The Yendri doctor? Something was coming thunderously up behind him. Flowering Reed looked at Smith with purest hatred in his eyes and grimaced around the tube between his clenched teeth.

Then Smith was down, he was hit and he seemed to have struck his head on something, because it hurt a lot, and there was some other injury but minor, a little stinging in his arm. Smith turned his head and saw three tiny feathered darts sticking out of his bicep. Knowing that he must get the thorns out, he raised his machete to scrape them away; but the room blurred in bloody darkness before he could tell if he'd succeeded. *Oh,* he thought, *I'm dead.*

He was listening to Lord Ermenwyr talk, smoothly, persuasively, and what a silky manner the lordling could summon when he wanted to!

". . . assassins, without a doubt hired by my father's enemies. Professionals, artfully disguised. Why, you hadn't any idea they weren't simple traders, had you?"

The Housekeeper was moaning apologies.

Smith opened his eyes and looked up at the Yendri doctor, who was stitching up Smith's scalp. At least, that was what he looked as though he were doing. Smith could neither feel the jab of the needle nor any other sensation. He tried to speak and discovered that he was limited to fluttering his eyelids. The Yendri noticed his panic.

"You can't move because the darts in your arm were poisoned. We got them out, and I gave you an antidote. The paralysis will go away, in time. You're a fortunate man," he said, and resumed his task.

"A *very* fortunate man," agreed Balnshik, looming at the doctor's elbow. "Do hurry and recover, Caravan Master. I'm going to thank you personally for your act of heroism." She caressed him in a way that suggested something very nice indeed and Smith's heartbeat quickened.

"What, is he conscious?" Lord Ermenwyr leaned over him from the other side. "Bravo, Caravan Master! Yes, you certainly don't want to die now. Nursie could suck the silverplate off the knob on a City Factor's staff."

Balnshik smiled gently and, placing her open palm on the lordling's face, shoved him backward. The doctor looked horrified. She leaned low into Smith's line of sight, and he almost felt the weight of her breasts.

"You have the gratitude of his lord father," she crooned, and kissed Smith. *Of all times to be paralyzed,* he thought. That was all he knew for a while.

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"The boys have sworn up and down you've been our caravan master for years and that you've never even been near Karkateen, so all that rubbish about a charge of theft has been dropped," Mrs. Smith told him, exhaling smoke.

"What about Flowering Reed?" Smith asked, speaking with difficulty.

"Not a trace of him," she replied in disgust. "Slithered out into the night like a snake, and must have gone over the wall like a shadow. Bloody backstabbing greenie. No way to tell if it was him set those assassins on you, as they're all dead, but it seems likely. You've made some enemies in your day, haven't you, dear?"

"They were all members of the Throatcutters, did you know?" Burnbright said. "I saw their tattoos. They cost an awful lot to hire. That's why I can't think they were after you, see, I think they must have been after whatever Parradan Smith had in his case!"

"Were the carts broken into?"

Mrs. Smith shook her head. "The boys had a good look. Everything's secure. Nobody else hurt but you, and at least you were spared the Mixed Grill and creamed woodpeas."

"So, you see? Everything turned out all right," Burnbright concluded cheerfully. "The Yendri says you'll be on your feet again in another day or two and we can push on. And think how much more room there'll be in the carts, now we're down two passengers!"

However, a solitary traveler came forward on the day Smith was well enough to leave and bought a passage to Salesh-By-the-Sea. His name was given as Mr. Amook, his occupation was given as Mercenary, his race was indeterminate, and he gave no address. He was very large and said very little. He took a seat in the cart just forward of Lord Ermenwyr's baggage cart and slouched there with his arms folded, and the screaming of the Smiths' baby didn't seem to bother him in the least.

Smith staggered out to the cart leaning on the Yendri doctor, who helped him up to a sort of couch the keymen had made out of the flourbags from Old Troon Mills.

"You must continue to take the infusion each night until the new moon," the doctor told him. "Your cook has the mixture; she promised me she'd make it up for you. When you reach Salesh, go to the hot baths in Anchor Street and ask for Levendyloy Alder. Tell him you need a detoxification, the full treatment. You should feel much better afterward."

"What'll it cost me?" Smith asked crossly, trying to find a comfortable position. He had just settled accounts with the Housekeeper, and was very glad his cousin had a business expense letter of mark.

"You can pay for it with this," the doctor replied, pressing something into his hand. Smith squinted down at it. It was a pendant of some kind, a clay disk on a woven cord. He slipped it about his neck.

"Thank you," he said.

"Be careful, Smith," said the doctor.

"I will be," Smith assured him. "Flowering Reed's still out there somewhere. You know, for all your people's talk about how much nicer you are than us, I always thought you were probably right. It's a real disappointment to find out you've got hypocrites just the same as we do. Or does your religion permit murder?"

The doctor made a wry face. "Hm. Not *my* religion, Caravan Master."

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"How's a man like Flowering Reed become an assassin for hire, then?"

After a long silence the doctor answered sadly:

"Who knows what is in his heart? But love can leave more death in its track than the most ardent hatred."

Smith nodded. He had learned that lesson elsewhere, long since.

"Go in peace, Caravan Master," said the doctor, and touched Smith's forehead briefly in blessing.

The carts jolted forward, as the keymen hauled them into the ruts. The watchmen worked the gate capstans. There was a last-minute boarding scramble. Burnbright trumpeted their departure from the Red House. They rolled away into the forest of bright leaves, and left that place of smoke and death behind them.

It was rough going now, uphill and down, and the keymen strained at the cranks until their bulging arms seemed ready to burst outright. The red stone road was uneven here and there too, or buckled and cracked from the roots of trees, imperfectly patched with cement. Sometimes it crossed the faces of high hills, hairpinning and skirting breathtaking drops into gorges far below; sometimes it ran through the bottoms of valleys, following watercourses, and cool air flowed with them as they shuttled along through willows going bronze in the frosts.

The black mountain loomed still above the red leaves. Smith, watching it from his elevated position mile after mile, had the eerie feeling that it was watching him back. Sometimes he thought he could make out structures at its peak, when no slate clouds obscured it: black walls and battlements, sharp obsidian spires, megalithic giants scowling blind in the sunlight. Sometimes he could see nothing but tumbled stone, a high field of basalt and fallen stars above the treeline.

But no one descended howling from that vast height, and when they made camp at night a profound stillness ringed them in. Even the Smiths' baby seemed subdued. Smith took to sleeping by day as much as he could, to watch the shadows beyond the trees after dark. Only once, one night, was there a distant scream that cut off abruptly. It might have been an animal. There was no sign of anything untoward having happened when they broke camp next morning.

Mr. Amook neither said nor did anything suspicious, but rode in stolid silence. He had no tattoos that Burnbright could spot, no matter how much she lingered near the watering huts. She was half mad with curiosity about him.

The day came when the road began to slope downward again, a little obscured by drifts of leaves, and there was undeniably more light and air getting through the ancient branches. Not only that, the black mountain began to diminish behind them. They could glimpse the smoke of distant cities below on the plain, and far off a level horizon so perfect, it could be none but the sea itself.

Smith was roused from his jolting nap by Burnbright signaling with her trumpet. He leaned up on his elbow to peer along the road, and sought in his memory for the signal codes. As she trumpeted again he identified the message: another caravan sighted. In the next few seconds he sighted it too, racing along the floor of the valley into which they were just descending.

It was immense, fully sixty carts long, coming on with speed and power.

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The runner pacing before it was a sleek muscular goddess, the steel hats of the keymen (and there were dozens of keymen) were polished, the carts were freshly painted with a flying dragon logo and loaded with cargo of every kind. Even the passengers looked prosperous, gazing out from blank dust-goggled eyes with cool indifference.

Here they came, now, charging smoothly up the hill toward Smith's caravan seemingly without the least effort! And here was their Caravan Master, sitting tall in the foremost cart, arms folded on the front of his long duster. No pistolbows for him; a long-range bow was displayed in its own rack on the side of his high seat, and a quiver just visible over his shoulder showed the red feathers of professional-quality hunting arrows. Smith gaped, and the Caravan Master acknowledged him with a majestic bow of the head as they came up on him and sped by.

The Smith children shrieked with excitement and waved. Even Mr. Amook turned his head to watch. Nobody could take their eyes off the grand spectacle, it seemed; and so everybody saw the last cart hurtling toward them with its outsize load, construction beams bound athwart the cart, protruding outward over its side just far enough to catch the protruding cargo net full of violet eggs on their last cart.

"Hey—" said Smith, watching in horror over his shoulder, and then it had happened.

With a sound like a bowstring snapping the net was yanked away, the cart was jerked completely out of its ruts and came down at an angle so it toppled over, dragged along on its side after the rest of the caravan flaring sparks, and the eggs it had held went spilling, bouncing, tumbling out and down the embankment.

"STOP!" howled Smith, but the keymen had already seen and were manfully braking. The other caravan, meanwhile, had cleared the top of the hill and gone racing on all unmindful. The cargo net fluttered after it like a handkerchief waving goodbye.

As soon as the carts had ground to a halt, Smith slid down from his couch and staggered, groaning as he saw the extent of the damage. Lady Seven Butterflies' holistic containers were bobbing end over end down the hill into the bushes. The cart lay on its side, still disgorging eggs at a slow trickle, and under its wheels one egg had smashed, and lay flattened on the road. Smith hobbled over and picked it up. Fragments of bright glass sifted out, bits of iridescent wing fragile as a dry leaf, colored like a rainbow.

Smith said something unprintable. He slumped against the cart and stared at the wreckage.

Crucible and the other keymen leaped from their seats and came running back to inspect the cart, hauling it upright.

"Watch out for the eggs, you lot!" shouted Mrs. Smith, making her way along the line. "Oh, no, did they break? Bloody hell."

"That's it," muttered Smith. "We broke goods in transit. My cousin will lose Seven Butterflies Studios as a client. Two passengers gone and a client lost! So much for this job."

"Now, now, young Smith, this sort of thing happens all the time," Mrs. Smith told him, but there was a certain awe in her face as she looked around at the devastation. She took out a small flask, uncapped it, helped herself to a good shot of its contents and passed it to Smith. "Drink up, dear. Despicable Flying Dragon Lines! I saw the way they had those beams loaded. Rampant heedlessness."

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"Don't hang yourself yet, Caravan Master," Lord Ermenwyr told him, approaching in a cloud of purple smoke. "You'll find yourself another job in no time."

"Thanks," said Smith numbly, taking a drink from the flask. The liquor burned his throat pleasantly, with a faint perfume of honey and herbs.

"Let's just get this mess collected, shall we?" said Lord Ermenwyr, peeling off his tailcoat. He draped it over the next-to-last cart and started down the embankment, then turned to look balefully up at the passenger carts. "You! Horrible little children. Get off your infant bottoms and be of some use. We've got to find all of these eggs for the poor Caravan Master!"

With yells of glee the three older Smith children jumped from the cart and ran down the embankment to him obediently. Burnbright came running back to help them. They set about hunting through the bushes for the remaining violet eggs, most of which had stopped rolling around by now.

"The wheel assembly's undamaged, sir," Crucible reported. "Both axles sound, but the hitch is wrecked." He held up a hook-and-rod twisted like a stick of Salesh Sweetvine. "We've got spares, of course. We'll just replace it, sir, shall we?"

"Go ahead," said Smith. He had another gulp from Mrs. Smith's flask, watching the children following Lord Ermenwyr about like puppies. He had stripped off his shirt and they were putting all the eggs they found in it. "This is good stuff. What is it?"

"It's a cordial from the monastery at Kemeldion," Mrs. Smith informed him. "The Father Abbot's own private receipt. We invented it together, he and I, when we were a good deal younger and less spiritually inclined than we are now." She groped in her pocket for her smoking tube and lit it. "Lovely man. Always sends me a barrel at the holidays. Nothing like it for a restorative when one travels, I find."

"Think it'll stick glass butterflies back together?" Smith wondered. "Maybe if we pray a lot?"

"I suppose it wouldn't hurt to pray. Don't worry, Caravan Master." Mrs. Smith kissed his cheek. She smelled of smoke and food and good drink. It was a comforting kind of smell. "Whatever happens, I'll fix you a dish of fried eel when we get to Salesh. You've certainly earned it."

"My cousin won't think so," said Smith morosely, and had another drink as Lord Ermenwyr clambered up the bank toward them, accompanied by the Smith children with their arms full of violet eggs. He carried a great number of eggs in his shirt. His bare skin was pale and fine as a girl's, though he was otherwise quite sinewy and masculine.

"You know, Caravan Master, I don't believe this is quite as bad as we thought at first," he said. "None of these seem to be broken at all."

"So maybe only that one smashed?" Smith felt his mood lifting, or perhaps it was the cordial.

"I saw a man get his foot crushed in a wheel-rut in Mount Flame City once and there was just nothing left of it even to be amputated," said Burnbright encouragingly. "No wonder that one egg broke! I'll bet the rest are fine, though."

"Perhaps it's Lady Seven Butterflies' ballocky holistic packing method saving the day yet again," said Mrs. Smith.

Lord Ermenwyr threw his head back and laughed, in the fox-yipping way he had. Smith felt Mrs. Smith stiffen beside him, and catch her breath. He looked at her, but she had turned her head to stare intently at the young

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man as he emptied his shirtful of eggs into the righted cart. When he had added Burnbright's and the Smith children's contributions they started back down the embankment again for more, and Smith leaned over and murmured,

"What's the matter?"

"Remarkable thing," Mrs. Smith said, more to herself. She followed Lord Ermenwyr with her eyes as he waded through the bushes, barking orders to the children. "May not be important. I'll tell you later."

To Smith's immense relief, it turned out that only the egg that had been ground beneath the wheels had broken. The remaining violet eggs, all one hundred and forty-three of them gathered from the embankment, proved to be whole without so much as a crack. The cart was repaired, a spare cargo net battened down over the surviving eggs, and they were on their way again.

That night at the camp, after the passengers had retired, as the fire was beginning to think about settling down to coals, Smith edged over to Mrs. Smith. She sat regarding the autumn stars in silence, sipping a drink. She had been uncharacteristically silent all that evening.

"What did you see today?" Smith inquired in a low voice.

She glanced aside at him. "It had been nagging at me the whole journey, to be perfectly truthful," she told him. "Something about that big strapping wench. Something about that dreadful young man. Rather amazing sense of déjà vu, though I could not, simply could not place what was so familiar. This afternoon it all came back to me."

"What came back to you?"

Before she replied she fished out her smoking tube and packed it expertly, one-handed, and lit it. Exhaling smoke, she said:

"It must have been fifteen years ago. I was working for the Golden Chain line then; they ran the Triangle Route, from Salesh to Port Blackrock to Konen Feyy-in-the-Trees and back to Salesh. So just skirting the Greenlands, you see? Close enough to have that mountain glowering down at us half the trip.

"We took on new passengers in Konen Feyy. A family. Just like the Smiths over there, in a way. Father and mother and a handful of little children, one of them a babe in arms. Bound for Salesh-by-the-Sea, too. But they were quite wealthy, these people. A whole retinue of nurses and servants and bodyguards they had with them. Dozens of trunks! And a private pavilion that was quite outrageously grand.

"They called themselves Silverpoint. He was a big bearded blackavised man, didn't speak much, but you should have seen his servants leap to his least word. And she was—well, she was simply the most beautiful woman anyone in the rest of the caravan had ever seen. She wore a veil and even so, half the men in the party fell in love with her. Even with a little screaming child on her shoulder the whole way."

"Their baby cried too?"

"Incessantly," Mrs. Smith said, with a grim look across the fire. "Half the night, every night. Until he stopped breathing altogether."

"He died?"

"Nearly. Four or five times, in the course of the journey. I don't know what was the matter with the poor tiny wretch. Perhaps he simply wasn't strong.

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Sickly, whey-faced little thing with limp curls, he was. Big wide eyes that looked at you as though he knew he wasn't long for this world and was keenly aware of the injustice of it all.

"It was the fifth night out it happened. The child had some sort of fit, turned quite blue and died. Not a breath in him. Their servants howled like mad things, drew their own knives and started hacking at themselves! The other children woke and started to cry, and their mother reached out a hand to them, but in a distracted sort of way because she was praying, quite calmly you'd think from the look on her face.

"I was awake—half the camp was, with that tumult, but I'd got up and was coming to see if there was anything to be done. And I tell you I saw the father come running up from wherever he'd been, grab a knife from a servant, shoulder his way into the lady's pavilion and *cut the throat of his own child.*

"Thought I'd pass out where I was standing. But before I could scream, the baby trembled, kicked its legs and drew in a breath, hideous whistling sound. The mother bent over him and I couldn't see more, but I heard him begin crying in a feeble kind of way. The servants all threw themselves flat on their faces in the dust and began moaning. I backed away, but not before I saw the father come out with that knife in his hand. I shall never forget the look in his black eyes. He didn't say two words, but one of the servants jumped up at once and ran to fetch a basin of water and a box from their trunks.

"She was a tall girl, the servant. Buxom. Hair black as a raven's wing. Splendid-looking creature," said Mrs. Smith, laying emphasis on the word *creature*. "Well. Nothing more to see, as the City Guard are so fond of saying. I crept off to my bed and had nightmares. Next morning the child's as peevish as ever, though a good deal more quiet, picking at the bandage about his bitsy windpipe. Not a word about what happened from his parents, though the lady did apologize for all the noise.

"We took them to their hotel in Salesh, as per contract. Last I saw of the child he was peering over the servant's shoulder with those big eyes, looking as though he was thinking about throwing another tantrum, and winding his little fist in her black hair.

"She hasn't aged a day. A few other details gave her away, as well. I'd bet a month's salary she was hurt fighting off that cat-sending. She's a demoness; and I know of only one man in the world with the power to bind demons reliably.

"The baby's grown, and he goes by the name Kingfisher now; but he's still got the scar on his throat," Mrs. Smith added. "I saw it this afternoon, when he laughed."

"I ought to have kept my shirt on," said a smooth voice from out of the shadows.

Smith jumped. Mrs. Smith set her drink down, and with great care and deliberation drew a pistolbow from inside her coat. It was larger than either of Smith's and, to judge from the size of the gears and the bolt, much more powerful.

"Oh, now, surely there's no need for unpleasantness," said Lord Ermenwyr, stepping into the circle of firelight. "Aren't we all friends here? Aren't we fellow travelers? Have I done anything evil at all?"

"You're the son of the Master of the Mountain," said Mrs. Smith, training the weapon on him. In the dim light of the fire his skin had an unearthly

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green pallor, for he had dropped the glamour that disguised him. He held out his open hands, eyes wide.

"Can I help that? Let's be reasonable about this. You've such a remarkable memory, dear Mrs. Smith; can you recall Daddy and Mummy being anything but perfectly law-abiding passengers? I'm sure we even tipped handsomely when we left the caravan."

There was a black mist flowing along the ground, out of the darkness, and it began to swirl behind him in a familiar outline.

"To be sure you did, on that occasion," agreed Mrs. Smith. "But your family has quite a reputation amongst the caravans, and not for generous tips."

"Oh, Daddy hasn't taken a caravan in years," said Lord Ermenwyr. "Really. Mummy made him give it up. I can't vouch for my brothers not engaging in some light raids now and then, one of those stupid masculine rite of passage things I suppose, but they're brutes and what can one expect?"

Behind him, Balnshik materialized out of the night, regarding Mrs. Smith and Smith with eyes like coals. She too had dropped the glamour. Her skin was like a thundercloud, livid with phantom colors, glorious but hard to look at.

"Put your weapon down," she said.

Mrs. Smith looked at her thoughtfully.

"Certainly, when his lordship gives me his word we'll come to no harm," she replied.

"You have my word, as my father's son, that neither I nor mine will injure you nor compass your death in any way," said Lord Ermenwyr at once. Mrs. Smith laid the pistolbow aside.

"That's the formula," she told Smith. "We should be safe enough. I'm pleased to see you did contrive to grow up after all, my lord."

"Thank you," he replied. "It's been touch and go, as you can see, but I've managed." Throwing out his coattails, he sat down crosslegged by the fire and took out his smoking tube. Balnshik remained on her feet, hovering over him watchfully. He continued:

"Just you try living the life of a normal young man—seducing widows, overindulging in drugs and alcohol, running up a bill at your tailor's—when people are always lurking about trying to kill you for entirely unrelated reasons. It's not fair," he said plaintively.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but aren't you a demon?" inquired Smith.

"Only one-quarter," the lordling explained, angling his smoking tube like a pointer. "Half at most. Daddy was a foundling, you see, so we're not sure. But what does it matter? When all's said and done, I'm not that different from the rest of you. Do you know why we were all going to Salesh on that memorable occasion, Mrs. Smith? Daddy was trying to give us a holiday by the sea. Buckets, spades, sandcastles, all that sort of thing."

"Perfectly innocent," said Mrs. Smith with measured irony.

"Well, it was! And Mummy felt the sea air would do me good. We were just like any other family, except for a few things like Daddy's collection of heads and the fact that half the world wants us all dead."

"That was why Flowering Reed was after you," Smith realized. "He knew who you were."

Lord Ermenwyr sighed. "It's not easy being an Abomination. Saints aren't supposed to get married and have children, you see. It's sacrilegious. Anyone who can kill a walking blasphemy like me gains great spiritual merit, I understand. Of course, you might have noticed Flowering Reed wasn't about

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to do the job himself; wouldn't get his pure hands dirty. But his hired killers kept failing, thanks to you and the late Parradan Smith being so good at defending us all," he added, looking at Smith with affection.

"Was that why Flowering Reed shot him in the back?"

"Exactly. Nasty little darts. Flowering Reed's people rationalize any guilt away by saying that it's the poison on the thorn doing the killing, not them. Charming, isn't it?"

"But that greenie doctor was quite respectful to you," objected Mrs. Smith. "Even reverent."

"Well, madam, there are greenies and greenies. Flowering Reed belongs to a particularly vicious fundamentalist sect sworn to avenge my mother's, er, sullying, by whatever means necessary." Lord Ermenwyr lit his smoking tube with a small blue fireball and took a deep drag. "Mummy's disciples, on the other hand, were willing to admit that she knew what she was doing when she married Daddy and brought all of us semidivine semidemonic brats into the world." He blew smoke from his nostrils.

"I'm intrigued, young man," said Mrs. Smith. "Are your parents happily married?"

"I suppose so," he replied. "I won't say they haven't had their quarrels, but Love conquers all. I believe that was Mummy's point in bedding the old bastard."

"You're being disrespectful, Master," crooned Balnshik, winding her hand into his hair. "You know that's not allowed."

"Ow! All right. Well, anyway—you can see, can't you, that there's no need to be alarmed by my presence in your caravan? All I want is to get to Salesh-by-the-Sea for a nice long stay at the spa, so I can recover what passes for my health," Lord Ermenwyr assured them.

"Your father's supposed to be the most powerful mage who ever lived," said Smith. "Can't he just magick you well?"

"My mother can heal the sick and raise the dead, but nothing she tries works on me either," retorted Lord Ermenwyr. He yelped in protest as Balnshik got a grip on his collar and hauled him to his feet.

"My master has the blood of two planes fighting in his heart," she told them. "It makes him unstable. Unreasonable. Rude. But there are advantages to being under his protection, dear Children of the Sun, and dreadful disadvantages to harming the least hair on his wicked little head. You understand, don't you?"

"Don't mind the death threats," Lord Ermenwyr told them. "It's her job to protect me. I'm sure you'd never do anything so stupid as to betray me to my enemies."

"No," said Smith hastily.

"I won't, either. But I shall refrain from doing so because I find the idea of your parents' love match rather sweet (*somebody* ought to have a happy marriage now and then) and not," Mrs. Smith looked up severely at Balnshik, "because of your threats, my girl."

Balnshik smiled, showing all her gleaming teeth.

"Lady, I am seven thousand years old," she said.

"Well, I *feel* seven thousand years old," Mrs. Smith replied. "Let's leave it at that, shall we, and remain friends all around?"

"You are as wise as you are skilled in the arts of cuisine," Lord Ermenwyr assured her. "You won't regret it. And now, will you excuse me? The night damps are settling in. Terrible for the lungs, you know."

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"Bid them goodnight, Master," said Balnshik, dragging him off.
"Bye-bye!" he called, waving his smoking tube at them.
Smith sagged backward, shaking.
"What the hell do we do now?" he murmured.
"Oh, we'll be quite safe," Mrs. Smith said, picking up her drink. "As long as we keep our mouths shut. I know demons."

And after all nothing had changed. Next morning both Lord Ermenwyr and Balnshik had resumed their ordinary appearance, and made no reference whatever to the previous night's conversation. Breakfast was served, camp was broken, the carts got back on the road again as usual. It was all so mundane that Smith, resuming his couch on the flour sacks, wondered if he hadn't had a bizarre nightmare.

That day they came down out of the Greenlands at last, and got onto the plain. The caravan seemed to skim like a bird, speeding along the flat miles. They began to spot other cities lifting towers above secure walls, other roads crossing the distance and even intersecting their road, and now and then they passed caravans bound for regions unknown or dull merchant's carts rattling along. The Smith children waved and shrieked happily at them all. Mile after mile fell away, and every mile brought nearer the grey hills of Salesh-by-the-Sea, the only interruption of the expanding steel horizon.

They spent one last night at a way station, though it was so palatial it scarcely seemed to fit the name. There was a shop there selling sweets and fruit, biscuits and wine; there were all of three stone huts (no waiting!); there was even a booth with a scribe who would, for a price, copy out a map of your immediate destination, guaranteed to be accurate for any city precinct. In the dark the wind shifted and brought them the strong rank salt smell of the tides, and Smith felt as though he had come home.

Salesh, like most cities on the sea, had only a half circle of city wall, a high curve of white flints at its back that gleamed in the sun like a shell-mound, when the dense fogs now and then parted to let any sun through. There the resemblance to anything so formless as a mound stopped, however, for the wall was neatly laid with mile-castles along its top, patrolled by watchmen whose armor was enameled in a pattern like fish scales, and within the wall the city was neatly laid out in a fan of long streets terminating each on the seafront.

The city gate was standing wide when they arrived, and Burnbright trumpeted their arrival with glee, pausing only to flash the license and manifest at the city guard. As soon as they were waved through she leaped into the lead cart next to Pinion and flung both her fists toward the sky.

"We made it," she shouted, dancing. "We're safe! I'm great, I'm the fastest runner in the world, I kick like a cannon, and Mount Flame City rules!"

"Oh, sit down and watch your mouth," said Pinion, but he was grinning too. He steered them down the long hill in splendor, riding the brakes, and the iron wheels shot sparks like a fireworks display celebrating their arrival. Expertly he took them around the sharp turn at Capstan Street, and they rocketed into the vast echoing hall of the Salesh-by-the-Sea caravan depot.

It was crowded and very loud, for another caravan had arrived just before them. Porters were lined up along the arcades, displaying their muscles as they awaited employment. The runners had taken an entire arcade for

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themselves and sat or leaned there, gossiping together, a blaze of scarlet uniform in the shadows. Clerks worked their way along the line of carts with manifest checklists, recording the arrival of goods and overseeing their unloading. Smith slid hastily from the floursacks and turned to collide with the Smiths and their baby.

"Well, here we are at last," he said.

"At last," Mr. Smith agreed. "And I must say I—Children! Come back here right now! I must say I've never beheld such personal bravery in a Caravan Master. Both my sons have told me they want to be just like you when they grow up, isn't that right, boys?"

"No," said the smaller of the boys. "He gets hurt all the time."

"That man is stealing our trunks!" screamed the little girl.

"No, no, that's our porter! Meefa, stop kicking the nice man! I—will you excuse us? Thank you so much," said Mr. Smith, and hastened away. Just beyond him, Mr. Amook was shouldering his one bag. He slipped off into the crowd and disappeared.

"Safe haven at last, eh?" said Lord Ermenwyr, emerging from his palanquin and yawning. "Good old Salesh-by-the-Sea. What memories of innocent childhood! Burying one's brothers in the sand. Suffering agonizing sunburns. Watching all the nude bathers. How I used to love toddling up to pat their bottoms! You can get away with it when you're three," he added ruefully.

"Master, the porters are here," announced Balnshik, swaying up at the head of a line of massive fellows who followed her with stunned expressions.

"Right. You! Four of you on the palanquin poles, all the same height, please, and if you can get me to the spa without making me motionsick you'll get a bonus. Mind those trunks! Now, Caravan Master," Lord Ermenwyr said, turning back to Smith. "Here's for your efforts in the line of duty." He took Smith's hand and set a purse in it, quite a heavy purse for its size. Then he leaned close and spoke in an undertone. "For your efforts beyond the call of duty, will you come be my guest at the spa tonight? Dinner, drinks and general fun. We'll talk. Eh? And Nursie would still like to thank you personally, you know." He elbowed Smith meaningfully.

"Honor on your house, my lord," said Smith. Lord Ermenwyr hooted in derision.

"Talk about impossibilities! I should tell you about the time—"

"Master, we don't want to keep the gentlemen waiting," said Balnshik. She caught him by his collar and the seat of his trousers and forcibly assisted him up into the palanquin, which had been hoisted onto the shoulders of four stolid porters. Having shoved him inside and closed the curtain on him, she turned to Smith with a dazzling smile. "Do come tonight, please."

"Yes, Ma'am," Smith stammered.

"Until this evening, then," she said, and turning to the porters she ordered them to follow her in a voice that lashed like a whip, and strode from the caravan depot, breasts jutting arrogantly. They followed her, needless to say.

Smith stared after her until his attention was pulled away by a clerk approaching him.

"Caravan Master—" the clerk peered over his spectacles at the manifest, "Smith? What's this I hear about damaged goods?"

"It's only one unit of one consignment," Smith explained. "The flour and the mineral pigments are fine."

"Yes, they're already claimed. But the shipment to Lady Katmile?"

"There was an accident," said Smith, sweating slightly as he turned and

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rummaged in his pack for the broken egg. "Minor collision. Not our fault. Just this one, see? But all the others are intact!" He waved at the one hundred and forty-three violet eggs reposing under their cargo net.

"Eggs?" The clerk frowned. "Most irregular. Who on earth authorized packing containers like that?"

"The sender, if you must know," said Mrs. Smith, bustling up to Smith's rescue. "All her own design. We hadn't a thing to do with it. Bloody nuisance the whole trip. She's lucky it's only the one!"

"We were attacked a lot, sir," Smith told the clerk. The clerk's eyes widened behind his spectacles, which magnified the expression freakishly.

"You'd better fill out an Assault, Damage, and Loss form," he said.

"He's going to get off his feet and have a drink first," stated Mrs. Smith, linking her arm through Smith's. Behind her, the keymen and Burnbright assembled themselves to glare at the clerk. "Aren't you, Caravan Master? Anybody wants to see us, we'll be in the Stripped Gear over there." She pointed to a dark doorway set invitingly at the back of an arcade.

"That's right," said Crucible. "This is a wounded man, you know."

"And if he dies there'll be all kinds of trouble, because he's the owner's cousin," said Burnbright, pushing forward assertively. "So there."

"Come along, boys," said Mrs. Smith, and towing Smith after her she made for the Stripped Gear, with Burnbright and the keymen flanking them. "You'll like this. Charming little watering-hole for the trade. Doesn't try to foist one off with plonk and moreover rents rooms quite inexpensively."

"And we get our own bloody palanquin," said Burnbright, which made no sense at all to Smith until they got through the dark doorway and he saw the rows of booths built to resemble big palanquins, complete with curtains and thickly padded seats. Apart from that bit of theatrics, the Stripped Gear was just what a bar should be: cozy, dark but not too dark to spot an attacker, crowded but not too loud for conversation. Smith felt his spirits rising as the keymen vaulted into the booth one after another and pulled him in after them. Mrs. Smith and Burnbright got in on the other side.

"My treat," he said.

"No, no; at least, not the first round," admonished Mrs. Smith. "Pray, allow us. We're really quite pleased with you, Caravan Master, aren't we, boys?"

The keymen all chorused agreement.

"Coming on at the last minute like you did after poor old Smelterman took that bolt," said Pinion.

"Considering it was your first time and all," agreed one of the other Smiths.

"I had my doubts, but you held up," said Crucible. "You're no coward, I'll say that for you."

"And a good man in a fight, too," said Bellows.

"I never saw anybody bleed the way you did and live," offered Burnbright. At that moment the publican came up.

"Mrs. Smith! Charmed to see you again," he said, bowing. She extended a regal hand and he kissed it.

"Delighted to have returned, Mr. Socket. Six of your best Salesh Ambers for the gentlemen, a peach milk for the young lady, and I shall have a dry Storm Force Nine with a twist, straight up," she said. "Later we'll need to inquire regarding suitable accommodations for the night."

He hurried away, and after a pleasantly short interval returned with their order. When he had departed, Burnbright held up her peach milk.

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"Here's to our Caravan Master," she yelled, hammering on the table with her little fist. "Death to our enemies!" They all clinked glasses and drank.

"I have dreamed of this moment," said Mrs. Smith, lighting her smoking tube and filling the booth with fumes at once. "I shall take in a show along the Glittering Mile."

"I'm off to the Winking Tit," said Crucible, and the other keymen nodded in emphatic unison.

"Are there any places like that for ladies?" Burnbright asked.

"Not at your age, you silly thing," said Mrs. Smith. "What you'll need to do is get yourself over to the local mother house to clock in your mileage. You should be very nearly certified by now. What will you do, Caravan Master?"

Smith had been thinking in bemusement about the Winking Tit, but roused himself and said, "I've got something I have to deliver, so I guess I'll do that first. Tonight I'm supposed to go see Lord Ermenwyr where he's staying."

"And Nurse Balnshik too?" Pinion dug him in the ribs.

"You'd better order up some oysters," chortled Bellows.

"You know what you really ought to do first," said Mrs. Smith, pointing at the disk Smith wore about his neck, "is go over to the baths in Anchor Street and redeem that thing the greenie doctor gave you. You'll feel much better afterward, fit for the lists of love or whatever you get up to after dark."

"That's a good idea," agreed Smith, thinking of hot water and clean towels. "I've still got Troon-dust places I don't want to think about."

"It's awfully hard to get it out of your ears," said Burnbright seriously.

At this moment Smith glanced over and saw that the clerk had come into the bar with another person, and was staring about. He spotted Smith and the others and pointed, and the other person followed his gesture. Then she started toward Smith, and her attractive countenance was made less appealing by her expression of murderous rage.

"Uh—" said Smith.

"Caravan Master! Can you sit and brazenly drink after such perfidy?" she hissed at him. Everyone in the booth drew back from her. She was clearly wealthy, with embroidered robes. Her hair was done up in an elaborate chignon held in place by jeweled pins. One expected to see her palanquin shopping or in a stage-box at the theater, but certainly not leaning into a booth in the Stripped Gear, let alone with the veins in her neck standing out like that.

"Lady Katmile of Silver Anvil House?" guessed Smith. "Look, it was only one butterfly. Accidents happen and—"

"If it were only one!" she cried, and the clerk wrung his hands.

"Damage more extensive than reported," he said. "Contents examined with certified witness present. Every egg opened contained broken merchandise. Estimate fully half shipment in unacceptable condition."

"What d'you mean, damage?" shouted Mrs. Smith. "None of the damned things had so much as a crack in 'em, except the one we squashed!"

"Outer casings intact," admitted the clerk. "But inside—"

"What did you do, play handball with them?" demanded Lady Katmile. Smith closed his eyes, remembering Balnshik kicking violet eggs from her path as she ran, remembering Lord Ermenwyr juggling with them, remembering them bouncing down the high embankment. He said something very profane.

Lady Katmile reared back like a snake about to strike.

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"You wantonly destroy irreplaceable works of art and you have the insolence to use that kind of language too?" she said. "Well. This matter goes to the Transport Authorities, Caravan Master, do you understand me? I'll have your certification. I'll have the certifications of your underlings. I'll have your owner's house and lands and movable chattel. No fiend of the desert has thirst great enough to drink dry the sea of your debt!"

She turned and swept out, drawing her furred cape about her. The clerk lingered long enough to shake his finger at them menacingly. He muttered, "Complaint will be filed immediately," and scurried after Lady Katmile.

Stunned silence at the table for a long moment.

"Did she mean she was going to get *us* sacked too?" said Bellows at last.

"That's what she said," Smith told him.

"But—she can't do that. We've got a union!" he said.

"It won't do you any good if she has your keyman's certification canceled," said Smith. "Or my cousin goes out of business. Both of which seem pretty likely right now."

"I never even got my certification," Burnbright squeaked, and began to cry. She fell over against Mrs. Smith, who stared into the palpable gloom.

"Damn them all," she said at last. "I was planning on retiring soon anyway. May as well do it here. I've set aside a little money. Perhaps I'll open a hotel. Don't despair, boys. We'll think of something."

"Could you use a message runner?" asked Burnbright, wiping her nose on her sleeve.

"Perhaps. They're going to be hardest on you, young Smith," Mrs. Smith turned to him. "I'm sorry."

"It's not so bad," said Smith, still numb with shock. "It's not like I've got any money anyway. I can just disappear again."

"Again?" Crucible lifted his head from the table.

"It's a long story," Smith said. An idea occurred to him. "Look. Parradan Smith gave me something I was supposed to deliver for him."

"We have been carrying around gangster loot, haven't we?" Burnbright looked awed.

"I might get a reward. If I do, you can have it for opening your hotel. Less whatever I need to buy a ticket to—to wherever I'm going next," said Smith.

"That's extraordinarily good of you," said Mrs. Smith quietly, tipping ash.

"Aw, Nine Hells," said Crucible. "Why is it the best Caravan Masters either die or leave the business?"

Smith remembered the purse Lord Ermenwyr had given him and pulled it out. "Here. I'll go make that delivery. You get us rooms with this, get our stuff out of the carts and stowed away before the Transport Authorities seize it all. I'll be back tonight after I visit his lordship."

"Maybe he'll help us too!" said Burnbright.

"Never count on a favor from the great, child," said Mrs. Smith. She drew the pouch toward her and squinted into it. "Even if they are remarkably generous. Well! We are resolute. I'll just step over and have a word with dear Mr. Socket. Boys, leap hence to secure what is ours. Burnbright, stay here and blow your nose, for heaven's sake."

She stood ponderously in the booth. "And you, young Smith. If you're able to rejoin us, there's a back door to the lodgings here on Fish Street, seldom watched after dark. If circumstance dictates otherwise—" She leaned forward and patted his cheek. "I'll make good on that fried eel dinner sometime or other. Go now, dear."

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Having taken Parradan Smith's instrument case, Smith asked one of the porters where he might find the villa of Lord Kashban Beatbrass. Upon discovering that it was at the residential end of Anchor Street, he crossed over a block and descended the long hill. He could look down on the roofs of the grand townhouses, almost see into their private gardens, though around him was all the windy bustle of the poor end of the street. Fry-vendors with their carts shouted their wares, beggars hobbled or rolled along bearing signs listing famous sea battles in which they'd lost various body parts, shabby-looking men went in and out of lodging houses and ship-chandlers'.

The sea gleamed out beyond all his misery, under a band of middle air clear of fog. White sails moved on the horizon, making for Port Ward'b across the bay. Smith reflected that he'd probably head that way himself in the morning and sign on to a ship, preferably one about to leave on an extended voyage, under a new assumed name. Flint? Stoker? Ironboot?

An icy wind hit him, piercing his worn clothes, making his wounds ache, and fluttering before his eyes a green poppysilk banner. He peered at the writing on it. Yendri characters, advertising something.

Turning, he saw the shop flying the banner bore a large sign with the word BATHS. He groped and found the clay disk on its cord inside his shirt.

"Might as well," he told himself, and went in.

The warm air hit him like a blast from a furnace, but it felt heavenly, rich with steam and Yendri perfumes that made him think of wild forest girls who wouldn't keep their clothes on. Smith could hear a fountain tinkling somewhere and the splash of water echoing on tile. He made his way to the counter, which was almost hidden behind hanging pots of ferns and bromeliads. A Yendri in a white robe leaned at the counter, reading a city broadside. He did not look up as he inquired,

"You have come for a bath, sir?"

"Actually—" Smith pulled the stone disk off over his head. "I'm supposed to find Levendyloy Alder and ask for, uh, detoxification. The full treatment." He held out the disk. The Yendri looked up and focused on him intently.

"I am Alder," he informed Smith. "You have been ill? You have been, hm, wounded." He leaned over and took the disk. He passed it under his nostrils and scowled. "Poisoned. Hm. Please. Come inside."

He led Smith behind the counter into a changing-room with shelves. "Your clothes and belongings in there," he said. He vanished behind a curtain as Smith stripped down and filled a shelf, setting all his knives in his right boot and resting Parradan Smith's case on top of the pile with great care. Peeling off his bandages too, he considered his battered body and sighed. *One of these days,* he told himself, *I won't be able to run fast enough.*

When the Yendri returned, he was carrying a teapot and a small cup. "This way," he said, gesturing with the cup, and Smith followed him through the curtain and into a tiled corridor. They passed arched entrances to rooms with hot and cold pools, where other people swam or lounged in the water and talked. The Yendri led him to a room with a heavy door, handed him the teapot and cup, and worked the valve-lock that opened the door. Steam billowed out, hot enough to make the hall seem chilly by comparison. Smith peered in and caught a glimpse of boulders and swirling water.

"Go in," said the Yendri. "Sit, and drink the tea. All of it, as quickly as you can. It will cleanse you. In an hour I will bring you out."

"All right," said Smith, and stepped in cautiously. The door closed behind

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him, and in a moment the air cleared enough for him to see that the room was tank-shaped, with a drain at the bottom. Water gushed from a tap in the ceiling and streamed down the rock walls, which radiated intense heat, and splattered and swirled off the boulders before finally cycling down the drain. There was one curved stone seat, awkward to sit on.

"Drink the tea," said a disembodied voice. Smith looked up and saw a grate in the wall, high up. He could just discern the Yendri's face behind it.

"You're going to watch me?" he asked.

"Sometimes your people faint," the Yendri replied. "The tea, please."

"All right." Smith sipped it grudgingly, but found it surprisingly good; hot and spicy. He drank it all and only when he had emptied the teapot did he notice the aftertaste.

"This isn't a purge, is it?" he asked.

"Yes," the Yendri replied. Smith groaned.

In the next hour a great deal of nasty stuff went down the drain, including a couple of old tattoos, exuding from his frantic skin like black syrup. Smith saw dirt from every place he'd ever lived coming to the surface, the yellow dust of Troon, the red dust of Mount Flame City, some gray residue he didn't want to think about. Occasionally jets of hot water shot from the ceiling, flooding the filth down the drain and almost washing Smith away with it. He clung to the stone perch and cursed the Yendri steadily. The Yendri watched him, impassive; and at the end of the hour shut off the water, and came to let Smith out.

Smith had planned to throttle him the minute he could reach him, but collapsed on him instead. He let the Yendri support him back down the hall to a room with a tepid pool. The Yendri toppled him in and told him to swim. Smith decided to drown, but found to his astonishment that his strength was returning, and with it an extraordinary sense of well-being. After he had splashed about a while a pair of hulking bath attendants came to haul him out, slap him with cold towels and make him drink a lot of plain water. They led him at last to a massage chamber, where he was soaped and rinsed and oiled and kneaded. Then they applied fresh bandages to his wounds.

By that time Smith felt wonderful, and no longer wanted to kill anybody. This made the events of the next few moments all the more unfortunate.

When the attendants had done with him, they indicated he should dress himself again. He floated out to the changing room, seemingly ten years younger than he had been when he left it.

A bulky man in very fine clothes was removing them in there, and three other men stood attendance on him, taking his garments one by one and folding them with care. Smith nodded as he passed them and went to his shelf. It didn't occur to him until his hand was on his clothes that he knew one of the men. Apparently it occurred to the other man at the same moment.

Smith heard the muttered exclamation and grabbed frantically in his right boot. He turned with a knife in his hand in time to see the other man advancing on him, drawing a blade fully ten inches long.

"This is for my cousins, you pig," snarled the man, preparing to slash at Smith. Before he could do so, however, Smith acted without thinking and threw his little knife.

Acting without thinking was something he generally did under circumstances such as the one in which he presently found himself. The details of circumstance might vary, but the result was always the same: a corpse at his feet and a great deal of trouble.

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He looked down now at the body that had his knife hilt protruding from its left eye socket, then looked at the other three men. Was that his heartbeat echoing off the tiled walls? The fight had taken place in almost complete silence.

"I'm sorry," he gasped. "I'm dead, aren't I?"

The bulky man nodded, staring at him with mild amazement. "Nice work, though," he said. "Striker was one of my best." He gestured and his remaining vassals seized Smith and forced him to his knees. He turned to draw a blade from his clothes and Smith spotted a tattoo on his bare back.

"You're a Bloodfire," he stammered. "You wouldn't be Lord Kashban Beatbrass, by any chance?"

"I am," the lord replied, turning with a curved ceremonial blade.

"I've got something of yours!"

"And I'll have something of yours in a minute." Lord Kashban grabbed him by the hair.

"No! Listen," cried Smith, and hurriedly explained what had happened to Parradan Smith.

"That's his case on the shelf," he said, tilting his head in its direction with some difficulty. "I promised him I'd deliver it to you. He said you'd pay well. I was on my way to your house, I swear."

The lord paused, looking thoughtful. He got the case down from the shelf and opened it. Lord Tinwick's cup gleamed at him. He lifted it out, examined it, checked the inscription on the base.

"What did you do with Parradan's body?" he inquired.

"It's in a stone cairn on the north side of the road from Troon, about two days' journey from the Red House up there," said Smith.

"All right," said Lord Kashban. He looked down at Smith, studying him. "You worked in Port Chadravac for a while, didn't you? Weren't you one of the Throatcutters?"

"Not exactly," said Smith miserably. "I was sort of a consultant for them. A specialist."

"Yes, you were," the lord agreed, and awe came into his face, though his voice remained level and quiet. "Artist is more like it. Nine Hells! *Nobody* ever saw you coming. They said you could vanish out of a locked room. What are you doing running from anybody?"

"I didn't want to do it any more," Smith explained. "Just because a man's good at something doesn't mean he enjoys it."

Lord Kashban shook his head. "Unbelievable. All right; Parradan said I'd reward you, so I will. You have your life. Let him go," he told his men, who dropped Smith's arms at once.

"Honor on your house," said Smith, staggering to his feet. He grabbed his clothes and began to pull them on.

"What do we do about Striker, my lord?" one of the men wanted to know.

"What do we do about Striker?" Lord Kashban pulled at his lip. "Good question. I've lost a good man. All right, wrap a towel around his head and carry him out to the palanquin. Tell the greenie he's sick. Take him home. We'll give him a nice funeral in the garden tonight. You." He looked at Smith. "Had enough of retirement yet? Getting a little tired of looking threadbare? Those boots are ready to split open. It pains me to see a man of your talents in the gutter. You could come work for me."

"You do me tremendous honor, my lord," said Smith, feeling his heart sink. "Though I have some other problems I have to take care of, and I don't—"

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"Understandable," said Lord Kashban, making a dismissive gesture. "You don't have to decide right now. But you think about it, understand? And come talk to me when you're ready. You know where I live.

"Here," he said, turning to his men, who had slung Striker's corpse between them and were preparing to take it out. He dropped the case with Lord Tinwick's cup on Striker's chest. "Take that home, too, and lock it up. I'm going to have a massage."

Smith pulled on his coat hurriedly and exited first. He walked quickly through the outer room, with the two that carried the dead man close behind him, and the Yendri turned to look at them. His eyes widened but he made no sound; only shook his head sadly as they stepped out into the street.

Not caring to watch the body being stowed away in Lord Kashban's palanquin, Smith faded into the crowd and put some distance between himself and the bathhouse. It was getting dark, just the blue time of twilight he had always found comforting, and yellow lamps were being lit in every street and along the seafront. He found little to comfort him now, however.

He hated to think that he would have to accept Lord Kashban's offer, but it was the answer to his current predicament. He'd be able to stop running, he'd have protection from the law. He'd have money. More than enough to compensate Mrs. Smith and the others for the loss of their jobs. All he'd have to do was kill people, though he had promised himself he'd never earn his living that way again.

Not that there was any societal stigma involved in professional killing, at least among the Children of the Sun. Murder in the cause of a blood feud was honorable, and murder in the service of one's sworn lord a sure way for a bright young person to advance. Other races had difficulty understanding this cultural tradition, though one crabbed Yendri philosopher had advanced the opinion that, since the Children of the Sun seemed incapable of practicing any form of birth control, perhaps it was best to let them indulge their need to slaughter themselves as a means of keeping their population at manageable levels.

Smith respected tradition as much as the next man. He just didn't like to kill.

But it was what he was best at, and he had no other options that he could see.

Other than a dinner date with demons.

He had nearly reached the bottom of the hill now, and was in the neighborhood of the grand hotels, the gracious private houses fronting on the sea. Cold waves boomed on the empty beach, but along the Glittering Mile it might have been summer, so many lights were lit, so many well-dressed people were out and promenading on the seafront or being jogged from one fashionable address to another in open palanquins.

Smith hurried through them with his ragged coat collar turned up, looking for the spa. It was easy to find: it covered several square blocks. Everything was on a grand scale, with a lot of white marble and soaring columns and domes. The main entry hall was lit with barrel-sized lanterns brilliant enough to have guided ships at sea, and Smith felt dreadfully conspicuous as he scuttled in out of the night. The desk clerk stared at him in disbelief.

Fortunately, however, he was expected, and so the clerk led him out through the scented gardens to the grandest suite in the complex. It looked

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like a temple from the outside. It looked like a temple from the inside, too, as Smith was to discover.

"It's our old friend the Caravan Master, Nursie," Lord Ermenwyr yowled in delight, flinging the vast double doors wide. The clerk paled and vanished into the night. Lord Ermenwyr was stark naked except for a flapping dressing-gown of purple brocade and what appeared to be a pair of women's underpants on his head. His smoking tube was clenched in a ferocious grin and his pupils were tiny. Behind him, a prostitute was attempting to depart discreetly, in evident distress at lacking a certain item of her attire.

"Welcome, Caravan Master!" The lordling flung his arms around Smith. "My, you smell a *lot* better. Come in, it's a catered affair, don't you know! Lots of lovely excess. What?" he snapped at the girl, who had timidly pulled at his elbow. "Oh, you've no sense of romance at all."

He yanked off the underpants and handed them to her, then turned with aplomb and took Smith's arm in his, towing him from the hall. "Look at it all," he said, waving a hand at the vaulted ceiling with its mural of fluttering cherubs. "Pretty grand after all those nights of wretched wilderness, eh? Of course, a Yendri would purse his sanctimonious lips and say the glorious immensity of the stars was a far more splendid canopy for one's repose, but you know what I say to that?" He blew a juicy raspberry. "Oh, I love, love, *love* artifice and decadent luxuries! Look at this!"

Dropping Smith's arm he ran to the immense canopied bed and hurled himself into the middle of the scarlet brocade counterpane, where he began to leap up and down. The canopy was a good fifteen feet in the air, held aloft on a gilded finial, so he ran no risk of bouncing into it.

"I—adore—cities, I—despise—Nature," he panted. "Whoopee!"

"Master, did you pay that poor girl?" Balnshik came into the room, attired in a white robe demurely tied shut. "You've left the door open, darling. Hello, Smith." She turned and caught his head in both her hands, giving him a kiss that left his knees weak. "Don't mind him. He's overexcited. You haven't even offered him a drink, have you, you little beast?"

"Eeek! What was I thinking?" Lord Ermenwyr scrambled down and raced into the next room, reappearing a moment later with a bottle and glass. "Here you go, Smith. This cost an awful lot of money. You're sure to like it." He poured a glass and offered it to Smith with a deep bow.

"Thank you," said Smith. Behind him he heard Balnshik slam and bolt the great doors, and realized that it was far too late to run. *What the hell,* he thought, and sampled the wine. It was sparkling and tasted like stars. Lord Ermenwyr drank from the bottle.

"Mm, good. Come on, let's dine," he said, and pulled Smith into the next room.

"Oh," said Smith, starting forward involuntarily. He hadn't eaten in hours and was abruptly aware of it at the sight of the feast laid out on the table. There were a couple of huge roasts, a hen, oysters, a whole baked fish in wine sauce, various covered tureens, hot breads and butter in several colors, more bottles, a pyramid of ripe fruit and another of cream buns and meringues, as well as a large cake sulking in a pool of liqueur. As usual for Feasts, candied kumquats and cherries decorated nearly everything.

"Room service," said Lord Ermenwyr dreamily, lifting the lid on a tureen. "Floating islands! My favorite. Don't stand on ceremony, Smith." He plunged his face into the tureen, only to be collared and dragged back by Balnshik.

"Sit down and put your napkin on, Master," she ordered. "Look at you,

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you've got meringue in your beard. Simply disgusting. Please be seated, dear Smith, and pay no attention to his lordship. I shall serve."
And this she proceeded to do, carving the meats and arranging a plate for Smith with the best of everything, the most prime cuts, the most melting fruit, ignoring Lord Ermenwyr as he happily drank custard sauce straight out of the tureen. Then she loaded a plate for herself, filled Smith's wineglass and her own, and sat down tête a tête with him as though they were alone.

"You followed that doctor's advice, I note, and were detoxified," Balnshik said, shaking out her napkin. "Quite a good idea. It's a nasty poison on those little darts, just like its inventors. Devious. Lurking. It can lie dormant in the flesh, even if one is treated with an antidote, and leap out into the blood unexpectedly later on."

"So—excuse me for asking, but—you really are a nurse, then," Smith said, trying not speak with his mouth full.

"Well, I know a great deal about death," she admitted. "That helps, you see."

"Hey! He can't pay no attention to me," protested Lord Ermenwyr belatedly, lifting his dripping beard from the tureen. "He's my guest."

"It's the other way around, darling," Balnshik informed him. "You're supposed to pay attention to him."

"Oh. How's the food, Caravan Master?"

"Wonderful, thanks," said Smith earnestly.

"You should see what we have for the orgy afterward." Lord Ermenwyr giggled. "Salesh Primo Pinkweed. What fun!" He stuck his head in the tureen again.

"I really must apologize for his lordship's manners," said Balnshik. "It's reaction. The journey was quite stressful for him."

"I guess we're all lucky to be alive," said Smith. "Have those people tried to get him before?"

"Mm." She nodded, taking a sip of her wine. "But seldom so persistently. His lord father had no idea they'd have the audacity to make an attempt within sight of his own house. There are probably going to be some rather horrible reprisals. Whatever my master may say, his lord father loves him."

"Are the rest of the children like that?"

"No, fortunately." Balnshik looked amused. "My master is quite unique."

Lord Ermenwyr fell off his chair with a crash.

"Excuse me a moment, won't you?" Balnshik requested, and rising she fetched a cushion and tucked it under the lordling's head where he lay unconscious. She took the tureen from his hands and set it back on the table.

"Is he all right?" asked Smith, alarmed.

"It's just the sugar hitting the drugs. He'll sleep for half an hour and then he'll be up and bouncing around again," Balnshik said offhandedly, sitting back down and picking up a chop bone, which she proceeded to gnaw with unsettling efficiency. Smith noticed now that there was nothing on her plate but meat, all of it blood-rare.

"Uh . . . I don't mean to be rude, but . . . young as he is, and sick as he is, why was he sent to Troon in the first place?" Smith inquired. "Shouldn't he be kept at home?"

Balnshik rolled her eyes.

"A joke got out of hand. One of his brothers and several of his sisters tried to kill him. Not very hard, you understand, but enough to cause terrible conflicts in the servants' hall. When you are bound by oath to slaughter any

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who attack one of his lord father's getting, and then the wretched little gets attack each other—well, what are you to do? It plays havoc with the semantics of one's geas. Very inconsiderate of them, and their lady mother—" Balnshik bowed involuntarily "—told them so, too. We were all very grateful.

"In any case, his lord father thought the responsibility of a diplomatic mission would be good for him. My master managed the business very well, but once he'd done what he was sent for he became bored. Always something to be avoided with the little monster." She glanced over at him in affectionate contempt. "He got into trouble, and then he got sick. But, not being allowed home just yet, he was sent here."

Smith felt a wave of sympathy for the lordling. "It's hell not being able to go home. They ought to reconsider."

"It'll all blow over in time." Balnshik shrugged. "And he loves Salesh-by-the-Sea. So much to do here."

"That's good, anyway," said Smith. "Should he really have all the drink and drugs and sex he wants, though? Maybe his problem is that he's been spoiled."

"That, and repeatedly raised from the dead," Balnshik replied. "You have no idea how difficult that makes instilling proper values in a child."

They ate for a while in silence. Despite its vast size the dining room was warm, and Balnshik's robe didn't do much to conceal her bosom when she leaned forward. His other appetites having been handsomely assuaged, Smith found himself contemplating matters of the flesh.

If he thought too hard about who and what she was, his brain began to gibber and tell him to finish his wine, thank her and leave with all possible speed. He found that he could ignore his brain if he gazed into her eyes and let her refill his wine glass. After the third glass his brain had stopped gibbering and lay in a quiet stupor in the back of his head, which suited him fine.

"Mmm." Balnshik pushed aside her plate, stretched luxuriously and rose to her feet, smiling down at Smith. "I seem to recall making you a promise, Caravan Master. Shall we retire to the adjoining chamber? I'd love to see if you're a master at other jobs."

"That's right, the orgy!" cried Lord Ermenwyr, sitting up abruptly. He staggered to his feet, grabbed a bottle from the table and lurched off into the adjoining chamber. Balnshik and Smith followed him. Smith paused to stare.

This was the private Temple of Health offered in every suite, as promised in the spa's brochures. It was an oval room with a domed ceiling of glass, through which the stars burned distantly. More white marble columns held up the dome, and between them tall stained glass windows stood dark and opaque, except when someone passed through the garden beyond carrying a lantern. In the center a blue pool glimmered softly, giving off a fine vapor of sulfurous steam.

To counteract the smell, censers were suspended here and there from the lamps, sending up long blue trails of perfumed smoke. All the steam and sweetness made it unlikely anyone would feel like using the exercise equipment that was dutifully set up on the far side of the pool. On the near side, the shallow end, were piled silken cushions, and a water-pipe was set up beside them.

"Hey nonny no!" Lord Ermenwyr writhed out of his robe and plunged into the pool. "Light the hubblebubble, Nursie dearest."

"Light it yourself," ordered Balnshik, turning to Smith with an expression

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of radiant tenderness and opening his shirt. "I have a reward to bestow, you ungrateful little sot."

"To be sure, you do," Lord Ermenwyr replied, leering, and leaned up out of the water and lit the pipe with another blue fireball.

Smith was selfconscious about his various cuts, but once Balnshik threw off her robe he utterly forgot about his own body. They joined Lord Ermenwyr in the pool and shared the water-pipe with him. After that things became somewhat confusing, but quite pleasant if one wasn't easily shocked.

Lord Ermenwyr swiftly became so intoxicated he was in danger of drowning, but refused to leave the pool for the silk cushions. Instead he yelled an incantation and from the suddenly roiling water a swim bladder emerged, of the whimsical sort generally provided for children. Instead of being a swan or seahorse, however, it was a mermaid with immense pneumatic breasts. He clambered into her embrace and bobbed about for a while making rude remarks until he passed out, tethered to the side only by the umbilical cord of the water-pipe's hose clutched in his fist.

"Now then, my lovely Smith," whispered Balnshik, gliding with him to the far end of the pool. She wound her arms around him and kissed him, and they plummeted to the bottom of the pool in a long embrace. Smith could have happily drowned then, but she bore him to the surface again and set him against the coping.

"Just you lean there, darling, rest your arms," she told him. She kissed his throat, kissed his chest, kissed her way down to the water line. "What was that vulgar phrase my master used?"

She went below the water line, and Smith remembered what the phrase had been.

Moaning happily, he leaned his head back and closed his eyes. In addition to Balnshik's other talents she was evidently able to breathe under water.

Though not to hear under water, apparently; which was why Smith was the only one to notice the struggle taking place outside the nearest stained-glass window.

Dragging his attention back from sweet delight with profound reluctance, he opened his eyes. Yes. Even stoned as he was, he could tell that was unmistakably a fight out there. Blade clanging on blade, scuffling boots, a muffled curse. He was gazing up at the stars in the roof and wondering if he ought to do anything about it when the question became academic.

Something blocked the stars and then the glass dome shattered inward, as two hooded figures dropped through on ropes like a pair of spiders. Before Smith could react, something else crashed through the window behind him, sending blue and green and violet glass panes everywhere. Smith gulped, aware that he had no weapons of any kind.

But it seemed he didn't need any.

There was a new roiling in the water, and something rose roaring to the surface. It was not a toy mermaid. It was gigantic, serpentine, scaled, writhing, monstrous, and it was the color of a thundercloud. Its teeth were a foot long. It snarled up at the men who had come through the ceiling, regarding them with eyes like glowing coals. They screamed.

Smith swam for his life to the shallow end of the pool, where Lord Ermenwyr still drifted unconscious.

"Up! Up! Out!" he shouted incoherently, grabbing for the first thing he could reach, which happened to be the lordling's beard. It came off in his hand, loosened by its long immersion in custard sauce and bathwater. He

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stood, staring at it stupidly. Lord Ermenwyr opened outraged eyes. Then he saw what was happening over Smith's shoulder, and his little naked punk's face registered horror.

"You wear a fake beard," said Smith in wonder.

"It's a facial toupee," Lord Ermenwyr told him furiously, rolling to the side as something hissed through the air from behind them. It smacked into one of the mermaid's breasts, which began to deflate. Smith looked down and saw a feathered dart.

Turning, he beheld Ronrishim Flowering Reed in the act of drawing breath for another shot. A wounded man was dragging himself along the coping after Flowering Reed, stabbing at the Yendri's ankles.

Smith acted without thinking. He had a false beard instead of a knife in his hand, so the effect wasn't as drastic as it usually was, but satisfying all the same. The sodden mess slapped full into Flowering Reed's face with such force it knocked the little blowpipe down his throat. He choked and fell backward. The man on the coping grabbed him and pulled him close, running the dagger into him several times. A wave broke over the coping and obscured them in bloody foam. Smith tried not to look at what was happening in the deep end of the pool.

Lord Ermenwyr had splashed out and was running for the dining room, and Smith raced after him. He barely made it through before the double doors slammed. Lord Ermenwyr leaned against them, gasping for breath.

"Better to leave Nursie alone when she's working," he told Smith.

"What are you, ten?" Smith inquired. Lord Ermenwyr just looked at him indignantly.

After a while the horrible noises stopped, and they opened the door far enough to see Balnshik lifting the wounded man in her arms. There was no sign of Flowering Reed or the other intruders.

"Bandages NOW," she panted, and Smith grabbed napkins from the table. She carried Mr. Amook (for it was he) into the bedroom and bound up his side. Lord Ermenwyr stood by, wringing his hands.

"Please don't die!" he begged Mr. Amook. "I can't bring you back if you die!"

Mr. Amook attempted to say something reassuring and passed out instead.

There came a thunderous hammering and shouts from the front door. Lord Ermenwyr wailed and ran to stick on a fresh beard. Smith, in the act of pulling on his trousers, stumbled into the hall to face the clerk and several members of the city guard.

"About time you got here," he improvised. "We just chased off the thieves. What kind of hotel is this, anyway?"

After profuse apologies had been made, after crime scene reports had been filed, after Lord Ermenwyr's baggage had been transferred to another suite and a Yendri doctor in Anchor Street sent for to see to Mr. Amook—

Smith, Balnshik, and Lord Ermenwyr sat around a small table in varying degrees of comedown and hangover.

"You promise you won't tell anybody about the beard?" Lord Ermenwyr asked for the tenth time.

"I swear by all the gods," repeated Smith wearily.

"It will grow in one of these days, you know, and it'll be just as impressive as Daddy's," Lord Ermenwyr assured him. "You haven't seen Daddy's, of course, but—anyway, what's a mage without a beard? Who'd respect me any more?"

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"Damned if I know."

"Fortunately, the witnesses aren't likely to blab. Horrible Flowering Reed is finally dead, and what a consolation that is! And those other two probably didn't see me, and if they did they're dead anyway. You're certain they're dead, Nursie?"

"Oh, yes." She closed her eyes and smiled blissfully. "Quite dead."

"So that just leaves you, Caravan Master, and of course you won't tell."

"Uh-uh."

"I'll make it worth your while. Honestly. Anything you've always wanted but never had? A retirement pension, maybe? Any personal problems you'd like some assistance with?" chattered Lord Ermenwyr, whose mind was racing like a rat in a trap.

Smith's mind, however, suddenly woke to calm clarity.

"Actually," he said, "There is something you can help me with. I need a lot of money and a good lawyer to defend me against the Transport Authorities."

Lord Ermenwyr whooped and bounced in his chair. "Is that all? Daddy *owns* the Transport Authorities! There are more ways of making money off caravans than robbing them, you see, even when you're forced to become law-abiding. Mostly law-abiding anyway. Name the charges and they're dropped."

"It's more complicated than that," said Smith, and, settling himself comfortably in his chair, began to tell the long story of everything that had happened since they bid him goodbye at the caravan depot.

Three months had passed.

"Terrace dining with a splendid view of the sea," said Mrs. Smith thoughtfully, waving a hand at a bare expanse of concrete. She had a drag at her smoking tube and exhaled. "We shall deck it over quaintly, and put up latticework with trumpet-vines to make it gracious. Tables and striped umbrellas." She turned and regarded the old brick building behind them. "And, of course, an interior dining room for when the weather's horrid, with suitably nautical themes in its décor."

"Are you sure you want this property?" inquired Lord Ermenwyr. Behind him, the keymen were methodically pacing out room dimensions. Burnbright stuck her head out an upstairs window and screamed,

"You should see the view from up here! If we fix the holes in the roof and put in some walls it'll be great!" She waved a small dead dragon, mummified flat. "And look what I found in a corner! We could hang it over the street door and call ourselves the Dead Dragon!"

Lord Ermenwyr shuddered.

"No, silly child, it'll be the Hotel Grandview: Fried Eel Dinners A Specialty," decided Mrs. Smith.

"The real estate agent said there was a much better location on Windward Avenue," said Lord Ermenwyr. "Surely you'd rather do business somewhere a bit less crumbling?"

"I like this. It's got potential," Smith assured him.

"Some people enjoy a challenge, Master," Balnshik told him, draping a furred cloak about his shoulders.

"But it's so weatherbeaten," he fretted.

"I should prefer to say it has character," said Mrs. Smith. "One can go a long way on character. Wouldn't you say so, Mr. Smith?"

"Yes," he said, slipping an arm about her and looking up at the improbable future shining in the clouds. "I'd say so." O

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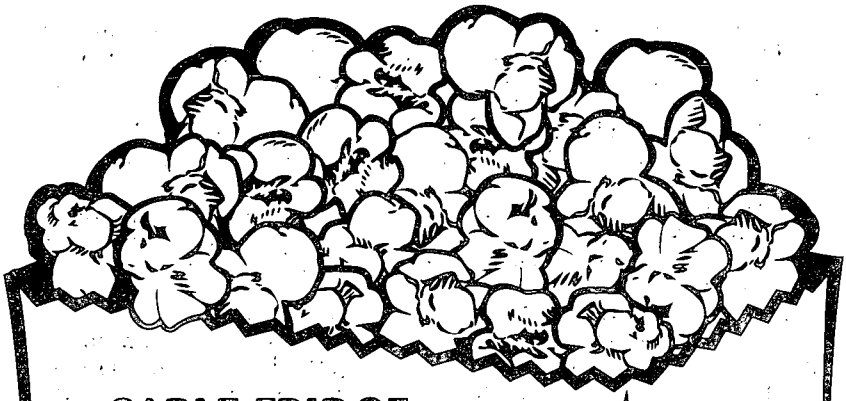

CABLE FRIDGE

My mister he
finally sprung for cable fridge.

We got the Italian channel,
the salsa channel, the junk food channel,
the gourmet channel

(which he don't watch too much
you know he has
cholesterol

but he don't turn on
the macrobiotic channel
or the vegetarian hardly at all).

Sometimes late at night I come home after work,
find him asleep in the kitchen
in front of the open refrigerator door,
his face lit up all warm and yellow
by the popcorn channel.

—**Mary A. Turzillo**

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ON BOOKS

Paul Di Filippo

The Rag and Bone Shop of the Heart

Michael Dirda, Pulitzer-Prize-winning editor and critic at *The Washington Post Book World,* is a unicorn, a fabulous beast surviving from a distant Golden Age, whose presence brightens our drab, Philistine, modern world. Dirda is the latest in a long line of "bookmen," literate appreciators of the written word in all its forms. Cyril Connolly, Vincent Starrett, and E.B. White spring to mind as predecessors who would be proud to number Dirda among their august company. In *Readings: Essays and Literary Entertainments* (Indiana University Press, hardcover, $24.95, 232 pages, ISBN 0-253-33824-7), Dirda collects many of his Sunday columns from the *Post,* short essays that range fearlessly over the personal, societal, and literary maps. Alternately droll and melancholy, buoyant and reflective, Dirda surveys and boosts, dissects and amalgamates, ponders and judges. His muscular yet weightless style honed to perfection, Dirda tackles all his topics with verve. Long a patron of the literature of the fantastic, he plumps for Vance, Dunsany, Le Guin, and Sturgeon, among others, convincing a mainstream audience of their worth. His enthusiasm and listmaking (in, say, the piece titled "Comedy Tonight," which sorts the hundred best comic masterpieces) provide the reader with guideposts to decades of reading pleasure. Buy this book, and, in effect, you'll automatically acquire a new friend who'll provoke, enlighten, and sustain you in your travels through the Lands of Literature.

If you enjoy surreal cartooning that's a blend of the work of Bill Griffith, Tom Tomorrow, Charles Burns, and Ken Brown, then you must glom onto Michael Kupperman's *Snake 'n' Bacon's Cartoon Cabaret* (HarperCollins, trade, $13.00, unpaginated, ISBN 0-380-80790-4). This wild assortment of Dadaist prose, conceptual madness and outrageous artwork will satisfy anyone who ever wondered how Picasso got his inspiration, what happens inside patrolling Sex Blimps, or how the superhero known as "Underpants-on-his-Head Man" got his start. Why, the parodies of pulp magazine covers alone justify your purchase!

Two outstanding graphic novels of a more linear sort come to us from NBM. *Wake: 1. Fire and Ash* (trade, $9.95, 48 pages, ISBN 1-56163-267-8) is a remarkably sophisticated work from artist Philippe Buchet and writer Jean-David Morvan. Opening on a half-naked young jungle lass, Navee, and her sentient tigerish companion, Hooyo, the tale quickly acquires an interstellar component with the arrival of a vast fleet of aliens intent on converting Navee's planet to their own uses. The colors here are dazzling, the perspectives and pacing superlative, and the writing intelligent, humorous, and suspenseful. A winner, and hopefully the start of a long series. In *Gipsy: The Gipsy Star* (trade, $10.95, 64 pages, ISBN 1-56163-268-6), writer Thierry Smolderen and artist Enrico Marini deliver a slam-bang global race involving su-

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pertrucks in a near-future setting. Their protagonist is a tough Romany driver who battles the powers that be for money, honor, and the survival of his young sister. Reminiscent in tone and setting of K.W. Jeter's *Noir* (1998), this book favors violence and spectacle over the ratiocination of *Wake*.

Barry Malzberg, our own Old Testament prophet of the Space Age, is currently writing at the apex of his form. That statement by itself should cause you immediately to sprint to store or website to purchase his new collection, *In the Stone House* (Arkham House, hardcover, $25.95, 247 pages, ISBN 0-87054-178-1). The majority of these stories derive from the decade just past, having appeared in an assortment of original anthologies and magazines, and evoke with painful precision what one character (the bluffly despairing Winogrand in "Amos") calls "this dummied-up century." In an effort to comprehend ten decades of pain, suffering, and bad taste, Malzberg launches many ingenious alternate histories: Columbus deporting the Chassids from Europe in "Ship Full of Jews"; Hitler on trial in "Hitler at Nuremberg"; Leonard Bernstein fighting as a footsoldier during World War II in "Fugato." Flailing gracefully like a dreamer trapped in the nightmare that is our shared history, Malzberg works through our worst fears for us, providing catharsis, if not solutions. He distills politics, art, sex, religion, music, and war into a salve, then paints your retinas with the results. And just when the treatment is beginning to make you almost despair of humanity, he gifts us with a hopeful story like "Concerto Accademico," where a floating dragon interrupts the rehearsal of the Tarrytown Symphony with its message of the persistence of magic.

Archaeological publishing. I've decided to use this term for what Stephen Haffner and his dedicated peers are currently doing on the small press scene. With a combination of scholarship, zeal, and artistry, they are excavating the buried strata of our field and presenting their findings in glamorous showcases. And what findings! These are not dusty potsherds or faded murals, but rather bright and sumptuous King Tut treasures! Consider Volume Three of the ongoing collected short stories of Jack Williamson, *Wizard's Isle* (Haffner Press, hardcover, $35.00, 540 pages, ISBN 1-893887-08-1). These stories seethe and bubble with life and stefnal zest. I hear prefigurations of van Vogt in "The Electron Flame" and echoes of Steinbeck in the mainstream story "'We Ain't Beggars.'" And the Ragnarok stylings of a story like "Born of the Sun" are pure Charles Harness before Harness ever began. Wherever SF goes, Williamson has been there and left!

I had never read the work of Bruce Holland Rogers until recently. What a mistake! His new collection, *Flaming Arrows* (IFD, trade, $20.00, 289 pages, ISBN 0-9671912-2-X), now holds a place in my heart close to the work of Don Webb. Holland's surreal, off-the-wall mini-narratives toss off ideational and emotional sparks galore. A piece like "Falling," about contentious lovers doomed to eternal togetherness, reads like a combination of Kathe Koja and Donald Barthelme, while one like "Little Brother™" is positively Bradburyian, and "Alexandrian Light" recalls Lucius Shepard. My favorite, though, is "The Wrong Cart," in which a simple trip to the grocery store completely derails four lives. Holland's chatty Afterword is a welcome glimpse at the inner workings of this unique writer.

In *Gandalph Cohen and the Land at the End of the Working Day* (Sub-

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terranean Press, chapbook, $12.00, 32 pages, ISBN 1-892284-47-2), Peter Crowther steps into Robert Charles Wilson or Charles de Lint territory, delivering an urban fantasy that reveals the secret workings of a sentient New York, as it unfolds in the miraculous saloon of the title. Melancholy, wistful, and ultimately life-affirming, this novella celebrates transitory companionship and dreams in the face of inevitable change.

Publisher Kelly Link compares the writer Dora Knez to Carol Emshwiller, among others. I'd add both Kit Reed and Robert Reed as datapoints, and second Link's assessment of Knez as "a writer other readers should know about." Knez's collection, *Five Forbidden Things* (Small Beer Press, chapbook, $4.00, 64 pages, ISBN unavailable), exhibits a fine burgeoning talent. I particularly enjoyed "Perpetual Motion," which features an affecting, circular narrative involving time-travel. This bargain book is your ticket to the premiere of a future star.

Mark McLaughlin is one sick puppy—in the best sense of the phrase. Supplement this assertion with the fact that he writes like a modern Firbank, and you will not be surprised to hear that his stories are simultaneously horrifying and hilarious, like verbal descriptions of Todd Schorr paintings. In the ten tales (six previously unpublished) that constitute *Shoggoth Cacciatore* (Delirium Books, chapbook, $5.00, 75 pages, ISBN 1-929653-11-5), McLaughlin hangs the corpse of the Chthulu Mythos up by its heels, butchers it, grinds it to hamburger, cooks it up, and serves you the results. (This is more or less the plot of the title story, in fact.) If you've ever wondered whether a beautiful young girl from Innsmouth could make it as a supermodel, for instance, read "She's Got the Look" and be reduced to a gibbering, tittering, blasphemous abomination of laughter. But don't say you weren't warned.

The seventh volume of Theodore Sturgeon's collected stories, *A Saucer of Loneliness* (North Atlantic Books, hardcover, $30.00, 388 pages, ISBN 1-55643-350-6), is the strongest to date. There is no disputing that Sturgeon had graduated to the ranks of genius by this stage of his life (1952-53). From the title story's opening examination of the will to live, all the way to the "poor little supergirl" closer ("The Education of Drusilla Strange"), the contents of this book were all written in the span of some twelve months. If any author today were to compose and see into print this many incredible tales within a single year, we'd hail him as the new genre Messiah. From gentle fables such as "The Silken-Swift" to tough-guy adventures like "The Dark Room," Sturgeon employs a variety of self-assured voices (including the semi-autobiographical first-person, in "A Way of Thinking"), a clarity of description and a fertility of invention, all brilliantly utilized to blast one unforgettable story after another straight past the reader's defenses and into his limbic centers. In "The Silken-Swift," Sturgeon remarks, "It is the one who is loved who must give and give." His audience loved Sturgeon, and he gave and gave till he had no more to share.

The man most responsible for ushering these Sturgeon stories into print, genial and generous polymath Paul Williams, has his own new book out, and it's a winner. In an act of determined genius, Williams has turned an essentially vapid format—the "Best Of" list—into a moving meditation on the creative act, from birth through instantiation to reception by an audience. In *The 20th Century's Greatest Hits* (Forge, trade, $13.95, 304 pages, ISBN 0-312-87391-3), Williams selects forty

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works of art—paintings, songs, books, live performances, films—masterpieces that define and highlight the century just past, then writes essays of varying lengths about them. Blending criticism, history, and personal anecdotes into a mesmerizing collage, Williams makes a strong case for all his choices, from the undisputed—Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922); Ginsberg's "Howl" (1955)—to the neglected—Dylan's *Renaldo and Clara* (1978); Doi's *The Anatomy of Dependence* (1971). And the linkages he establishes are mindblowing: the Beach Boys lead to Picasso, Ginsberg leads to Philip K. Dick, Melville leads to the Velvet Underground. Although these entries can be read separately, taken in order they build on each other into a kind of metanarrative about how to sustain the imagination in the face of the indifference, brutishness, and cruelty that all too often marred the twentieth century.

Publisher addresses: Indiana University Press, 601 North Morton Street, Bloomington, IN 47404. NBM, 555 8th Avenue, Suite 1202, NY, NY 10018. Arkham House, PO Box 546, Sauk City, WI 53583. Haffner Press, 5005 Crooks Road, Suite 35, Royal Oak, MI 48073. IFD, PO Box 40776, Eugene, OR 97404. Subterranean Press, PO Box 190106, Burton, MI 48519. Small Beer Press, 73 4th Avenue, Brooklyn, NY 11217. Delirium Books, PO Box 338, North Webster, IN 46555. North Atlantic Books, 1456 Fourth Street, Berkeley, CA 94710.

Hatters and Hooters and Newlies, Oh My!

Purely delightful. Sunny, silly, and sassy. A pleasure to read. Sometimes a book merits such uncluttered, simple praise. That's the case with Neal Barrett's *The Prophecy Machine* (BantamSpectra, mass-market, $6.50, 342 pages, ISBN 0-553-58195-3). Barrett, who is capable of very sophisticated and even grim fictions—see his collection from last year, *Perpetuity Blues,* for examples—has here produced the kind of light-hearted Baumian fantasy, inflected with de Camp & Pratt tones, that James Blaylock used to deliver in such books as *The Elfin Ship* (1982) and *The Disappearing Dwarf* (1983). Anyone who enjoys the work of Michael Shea or John Morressy will also find cognate pleasures here.

Master Finn is a bold young fellow, good with a sword but an artificer by trade, creator of the living automaton lizard named Julia Jessica Slagg, a smart-talking, deadly, shoulder-riding companion, powered by clockwork and motivated by a transplanted ferret's brain. Finn's *de facto* wife is ostensibly his servant, one Letitia Louise, a beautiful Newlie. Because of this relationship, Finn is subjected to much prejudice.

The Newlies, you see, are nine species of animal people, created some hundreds of years ago by two irresponsible sorcerers, Shar and Dankermain, in this land where magic and machinery mix. There are Bowsers, Dobbins, Yowlies, Vampies, Foxers, Snouters, Badgies, Grizzes, and Mycers. Letitia Louise belongs to this latter class, and is possessed of musty charm, a voluptuous form, and a willful but loving personality.

Finn, Julia and Letitia are en route to a vacation destination when the story opens. They have the misfortune, however, to have shipped with a scoundrel named Captain Magreet, who abandons them during a shore leave on the island of Makasar. Makasar is a deadly, absurdist land, where two religious factions—the Hatters and the Hooters—contend for dominance. (Think

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of Jack Vance's satirical theologies here.) Finn and his women find refuge in the only home that will have them (hospitality being an actual sin among the devout). Unfortunately this residence—belonging to the Nucci clan: Sabatino, father Calabus, and mysterious Grandfather—also houses the Prophecy Machine, a malevolent construct buried deep below the weird manse. Papa Calabus deems Finn a useful assistant to shanghai for aid with the balky machine, while Sabatino has his eye on Letitia, and Grandfather, should he be allowed to escape confinement, would like to kill everyone. The rest of the novel—whose timeframe extends only a few days, although the backstory is pleasingly deep—concerns the gloriously scatter-brained misadventures connected with this captivity.

Barrett does many things well here, all his talent and tricks conducing toward a brightly colored tall tale. His heroes are pure-hearted yet humanly flawed. (And the moments when we get a peek at the mental landscape of Julia reveal a convincingly non-human psyche.) His villains are all egomaniacal, colorful buffoons. His bit players (such as the Nucci servant, Squeen William) are all individuated just enough to brighten the scenes where they appear. Barrett's dialogue is suitably cockeyed, full of misunderstandings, high-handed threats, and refutations, and moony love-talk (between Finn and Letitia). Metaphors and similes are eye-catchingly extravagant: "A pale and runny yellow flecked with rusty spots of red, [the sun] looked like a very sad egg left in the skillet overnight."

Barrett ties up all the loose ends of his plot with a neat twist in this volume, yet a postscript promises us further adventures of Finn and his companions. I for one will be eagerly awaiting them.

My Kind of Town

How to put this without sounding demeaning, dismissive, or misguided?

John Ford's *The Last Hot Time* (Tor, hardcover, $22.95, 205 pages, ISBN 0-312-85545-1) is as near perfect a Young Adult urban fantasy novel as I can recall.

What's the matter with praise like mine? Only that Ford's book is being marketed as a novel for adults. Calling it perfect for a YA audience seems to imply that anyone over the age of eighteen would find it a less than satisfying reading experience. I appear to be saying that it won't appeal to all readers, just a subset.

Yet this reviewer, mumblety-mumble years old, read it eagerly and with enjoyment in a couple of nights, and found it crafted to the highest standards, mature and unclichéd, completely rewarding. Yet there is still no denying that the book holds even more attractions for a younger reader.

What can I possibly be talking about then?

What if I also said that some other near-perfect YA books were Heinlein's *Glory Road* (1963) and *Starship Troopers* (1959), Zelazny's *Nine Princes in Amber* (1970) and Herbert's *Dune* (1965)?

Those are all "adult" SF books, aren't they? Sure, but they also happen to feature juvenile or youngish protagonists, and push all the hot buttons connected with growing up. Discovering one's talents, learning one's limits, leaving one's family, making a place in the world, figuring out the opposite sex, reconciling duty and pleasure, balancing spirituality with earthliness. These are all issues that, for the most part, we put behind us after a certain period, having more or less resolved them to the point where we can go about

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our "adult" business. Not to say that these enigmas never resurface to trouble us in middleage or later. But even if they do, we're more experienced, not "virgins" anymore.

That distinction is what makes a novel perfect for Young Adults, even though it can still be read pleasurably by older folks.

A YA novel is about losing your virginity, in all aspects of the phrase, including a possible diminishment of the fabled sense of wonder.

Ford literally and symbolically conducts his protagonist on such an educational journey, in a setting perfectly congruent to the character's potential. He hits all the right notes with precision and grace, economically and vividly. What more could you ask?

Danny Holman, Iowa farm boy, lives on an Earth that has been breached by Elfland. At some point close in time to our own era, the old world of Faerie recolonized our dimension, with drastic results. (One of the first things the Elves made impossible was television!) Human civilization exists in various states, some areas near-status-quo-ante, other places utterly transfigured. Elves walk the magical streets of Chicago now, and that burg's where Danny's headed in his second-hand Triumph automobile when the book opens.

Danny's entry to his new city is dramatic. A trained paramedic, he helps rescue a mysterious mob boss, Mr. Patrise, and his party, after they are ambushed by rivals. Quickly adopted by his new mentor—who's shady but noble—and christened Doc Hallownight, Danny plunges into a world of shadows and illusions, a milieu destined to educate him quickly over the next few months. His eventual destiny is no less weighty than was that of Paul Atreides, but you won't see it coming till Danny himself does.

Ford's style is sparse and elliptical, yet poetic. This is the kind of book where the author works hard and subtly for 163 pages to earn the right to use the sentence: "Doc blasted the horn of the Triumph at the gates of Elfland." A lesser author might have made that the first sentence of the novel, and accomplished less. Ford's characters are all straight off the pages of Damon Runyon, in honest homage—jaded reporters, tragic chanteuses, scrappy girl bartender Ginevra, who becomes Danny's lover—yet they still manage to tug at your heartstrings.

If, after reading this fine book, you still doubt its ultimate YA nature, compare it with a close cousin, Tim Powers's *Last Call* (1992), and see if you can't tell the difference between a fable for virgins and one for those who labor rather more wearily "after such knowledge."

The Old Salt's Tale

The debut of a startlingly original voice in our field, especially a voice that sounds a grimmer, more classically tragic note than some of our more frothily entertaining bards, is always an occasion for celebration. The last time I noted such an occurrence in these pages was with the publication of R.E. Klein's *The History of Our World Beyond the Wave* in 1998. Now comes a book similarly grave and distinctive in its presentation: Adam Roberts's first novel, *Salt* (Gollancz, trade, £9.99, 248 pages, ISBN 0-57506-897-3).

Because what arrives unheralded and disruptively must always be compared with what has gone before, despite any injustices to all parties involved, let me just try to convey some of the sensations of reading Roberts's novel.

It's like reading Crowley's "In Blue" (1989) as rewritten by Malz-

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berg. It's like reading Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974) as rewritten by Norman Spinrad, or her *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) reworked by Ken McLeod. Or Robinson's *Red Mars* (1993) altered by Mark Geston. Or Eric Frank Russell's *Wasp* (1957) redone by Stanislaw Lem. Yes, that strange and enjoyable.

A sublight colonization party—twelve ships tethered to a tame comet—is headed toward a distant world that seems from past probes to be capable of supporting life. One ship, the *Senaar*, is crewed and captained by adherents of a rigidly hierarchical political system. Another ship, the *Als*, contains anarchists. Our narrators, in alternating sections, are Barlei, a general, and Petja, a typical libertarian type. The conflicts that arise between these men and their followers en route, before they enter hibernation for three decades of travel, are merely a sampling of the trouble that will follow on their new world, named Salt. Struggling with the inhospitable environment, the colonists nonetheless are fairly well off and secure enough to have time for mischief. Misunderstandings between the settlements named after the founding ships soon blossom into internecine war.

Roberts portrays both his dominating landscape—a world of chlorine-tainted seas and harsh radiation, yet weirdly beautiful—and his people astonishingly well. Lots of the uneasy laughter in this tragicomic book stems from the disjunction between viewpoints. Seeing the same events through the radically different minds of Barlei and Petja, the reader is astonished that any two humans could be so incongruent. Or perhaps the moral we are meant to take away is that any agreement at all between any two humans is the real miracle.

But the real core event that limns the full extent of the clashing worldviews is the arrival of a Sennarian diplomat, Rhoda Titus, in Als. Petja's take on her mission and her reaction to his indifference segues from hilariously comic to shatteringly tragic, once battle intervenes. And it's a surprise, yet somehow right, that Rhoda gets the final words in the book.

Roberts's real genius is in making neither Barlei nor Petja the absolute villain. Both are obtuse at time, both perceptive. Each honors his own values, and simply cannot fathom an alternate paradigm. Perhaps Barlei is a bit more self-serving and deceitful, but Petja's frigid honesty and lack of connection serve him and his community just as ill as Barlei's glory-seeking sternness. And neither man "wins" in the end.

Roberts already has a second novel due, with the mysterious title of *On*. I'm betting it's as unlike *Salt* as *Salt* is unlike anything else.

Blood and Guts in a Brave New World

Here's a test: see if you can assign the correct author to these sentences. The material concerns two girls, one named Janey and one named Jayne, but I might have randomly switched the proper names around. One set of sentences was penned by transgressive underground author Kathy Acker, and the other by genre aboveground author Rebecca Ore.

1) "Janey sees Arnold every day because she has to. He's her source of human contact."

2) "Jayne felt as though all this was happening to a body two feet below her."

3) "Jayne wondered if Renee had gone crazy, but she felt colder than she ought to have felt."

4) "As Janey was lying on her mat, writing this, two teenage hoods, one

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black and one white, came into the apartment."

5) "Sitting sick on the floor, listening to her mother, Jayne wanted an abortion."

6) "As soon as Janey woke up, she called Bill, desperate."

Okay, class, pencils down. First off, I didn't change any character names. All the sentences about Janey derive from Kathy Acker's punkish, experimental *Blood and Guts in High School* (1978). All the ones about Jayne were plucked from Rebecca Ore's new novel, *Outlaw School* (AvonEos, trade, $13.50, 310 pages, ISBN 0-380-79250-8). The point of this exercise? Certainly not to knock Ore, who's written a well-crafted, impassioned, on-the-side-of-the-angels dystopian novel, an undeniable if unacknowledged homage to Acker. No, I only want to make a point about how yesterday's avant-garde, controversial literature becomes, with some inevitable airbrushing, today's acceptable commodity. Ah, if only Acker had lived to see this mixed triumph.

Jayne (I could not find a surname to hang on her) is a young girl growing up sometime after 2014, in a world not favorable to females with brains or quirks or ambition. (Actually, this future America oppresses numerous classes of people, not just women.) We follow her from childhood to old age down a path bestrewn with unsympathetic parents, a traitorous sister, quisling fellow females, Prozac-dispensing authorities, and murderous males. Offering support to Jayne are outcasts such as fellow mental patients, hackers, hookers, and the occasional good boyfriend. Jayne's story is related in the kind of deadpan, slightly non-idiomatic voice Kathy Acker perfected, style following theme and character as the third clue to Ore's influences.

The good parts about this book: Jayne is pretty likable, and it's engaging to read about her, although certain "idiot plot" choices on her part make you want to slap her and wake her up. Basically, though, you're on Jayne's side throughout, wincing when she does, celebrating her minor victories. And the supporting characters exhibit fair amounts of depth as well, particularly a whore named Suzanne. Ore's SF speculations are diverting. Imagine using a VR rig on women in labor, to deprive them of the birthing experience. That's an odd mix of palliative and torture that's uniquely imagined.

But Ore's dystopia is as rickety a construction as any since the heyday of Jerry Sohl, and that vitiates the whole book. Her scarcity-based, vaguely Orwellian state is a mishmosh of contemporary bugbears without any real foundation, like the underground world in Ellison's "A Boy and His Dog." The stage set of her "scary" tyranny has nothing behind it, and it's as easy to escape as walking around a scrim. Not only are the anti-womyn excesses of the rulers bad enough, but gratuitous gestures have to be thrown in. For instance, are we really meant to believe that the middle-class suburb of Jayne's youth features household sewers that drain directly into an open marsh? How and why did the suburbanites disconnect from the present-day municipal system? Did volunteers dig new trenches to the marsh? No, it's just a neat *symbol* of how careless and callous the rulers are, so Ore throws it in. Additionally, these residents of the mid-twenty-first-century are plainly us, not real citizens of the future. One of Jayne's peers talks about having "old hippies" for parents. Listen: by 2050, all the "old hippies" will be *dead,* not *breeding!*

Read *Outlaw School* for the voice of Jayne and some inventive touches. But it's no more of a fist in the face of authority than a Marilyn Manson song.

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Three Kids in a Boat

Face it: it's Queen Rowling's and King Pullman's world, and we only exist on their sufferance.

Surely writers of children's fantasy novels must feel this way sometimes. Despite a welcome sales-boost-fallout from the Harry Potter/His Dark Materials phenomenon, it's hard to continually stand in the shadow of media giants. Just sitting down to write a book for an audience of eager grade-schoolers and pre-teens must feel like being the opening act for the Rolling Stones: a chance to make it big, sure, but who's really listening when they're waiting for the superstars and comparing you to the offstage champs?

Then there're the extra demands of this kind of fiction. Besides needing to possess all the traditional virtues of good writing, children's fantasy novels must also hew to some other strictures. They shouldn't be too silly or too scary. They shouldn't condescend to or talk above their readers. They shouldn't be twee or derivative. They must exhibit a sense of wonder and energy. Emotional resonance is a plus. Visionary exaltation, while rare, cements your success.

The latest contender willing to brave such a minefield is William Nicholson, an experienced screenwriter (*Gladiator* [2000] and *Shadowlands* [1993]), who sallies forth with his debut novel, *The Wind Singer* (Hyperion, hardcover, $17.99, 358 pages, ISBN 078680569-2), the first volume in a proposed Wind on Fire trilogy. I'm happy to report upfront that Nicholson has done a very credible job, turning in an adventure that delights and thrills. I'm not sure if his book will ever attain the status of a classic—that judgment awaits the publication of the whole trilogy and the passage of years—but in the meantime no fan of the celebrity authors will be disappointed with this talented newcomer.

The city of Aramanth (a name the botanically minded might find themselves continually and confusingly reading as "Amaranth") has fallen on hard times and doesn't even know it. Stratified into color-coded classes with membership determined by a dreaded High Examination, ruled by a directorate of scholars, with the nominal Emperor a helpless neurotic locked in his tower, the populace labors under the unnatural delusion that all is perfect. Forgetting their noble, unfettered past, the citizens are a bunch of frightened drones.

Except for the Hath family: Father Hanno, Mother Ira, the twins, Bowman and Kestrel, and baby Pinpin. Hanno is a bookish, unworldly librarian, while Ira is a fiery prophetess. Sister Kestrel is bold and impulsive, while brother Bowman is more introspective (they share a mental link as well). The two-year-old Pinpin is a budding rebel. Collectively, the family is a thorn in the body politic. After several run-ins with the authorities, the family is eventually split up, with Hanno going to a re-education camp, Ira and Pinpin sentenced to the Grey ghetto, and the twins setting off on a quest to find the lost key to Aramanth's glorious past.

For the majority of his tale Nicholson focuses on the twins, who are accompanied in their stirring adventures by a companion named Mumpo, who resembles a cross between Gollum and Ralph Wiggum. (*The Simpsons* in fact might very well be an entire hidden subtext here.) As they traverse the wilderness outside Aramanth, Nicholson treats us to a variety of inventive landscapes populated by vivid characters, including bombastic wind-sailboat captains (who blithely use the captured twins

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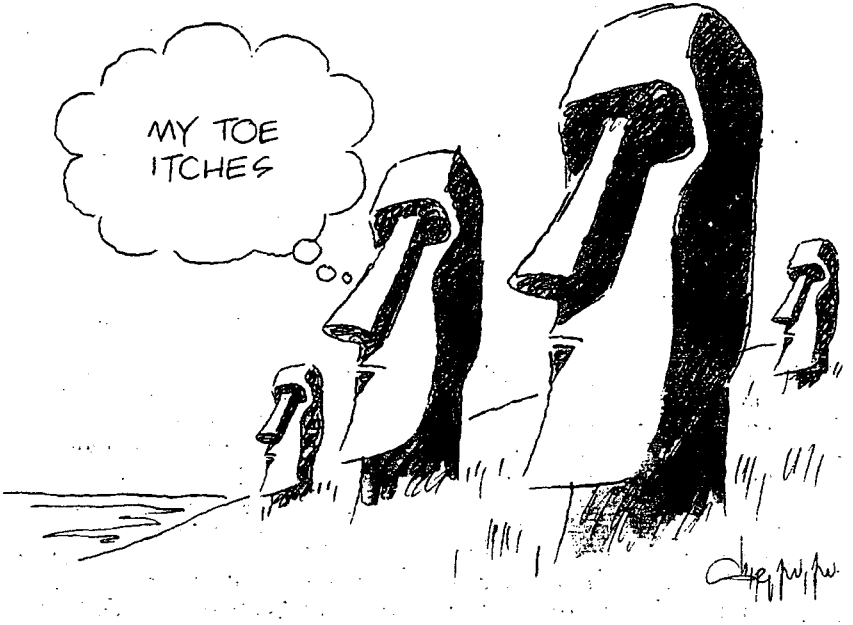
in a desert naval battle); short-sighted cavern dwellers; and a frightening evil force named the Morah, whose minions are the unstoppable, deadly Zars (deadly, yet led into battle by a majorette and marching band). The children's quest is brought to a definite and thorough conclusion in this volume, while still leaving the door open for further developments.

The overall tone of this book resembles no predecessor more than L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962). The humor feels the same, as do the family dynamics. Kestrel Hath is even introduced while having problems with school, just as we first encounter Margaret Murry. *Wrinkle* is a somewhat neglected landmark these days, and Nicholson has picked a good model.

"Nothing excited people in Aramanth more than seeing fellow citizens humiliated in public." With clever jabs such as this, Nicholson limns and then dismantles a more convincing dystopia in his kids' book than many an "adult" novelist. O



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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Busy weekends alternate with lulls this month. And WorldCon's coming up soon. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. - Erwin S. Strauss

JULY 2001

12–15—**France National Con.** For info, write: **c/o Huet, 138 Gabriel Peri #2A, St. Denis 93200, France.** Or phone: **(973) 242-5999** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). **(E-mail) alainhuet@aol.com.** Con will be held in: St. Denis (if city omitted, same as in address) at a venue TBA. Guests will include: none announced.

13–15—**ReaderCon. www.readercon.org.** Marriott, Burlington MA. Swanwick, Hartwell, many other writers.

13–15—**InConJunction. www.inconjunction.org.** Sheraton, Indianapolis IN. J. Rosenberg, S. Hickman, Asaro.

13–15—**Shore Leave. (410) 496-4456. www.shore-leave.com.** Marriott, Hunt Valley (Baltimore) MD. Star Trek.

13–15—**Khan. (719) 597-5259.** Ramada Inn, Colorado Springs CO. Musician Michael (Moonwulf) Longcor.

13–15—**ConTinuum. www.continuum2001.co.uk.** Thistle Hotel, Glasgow UK. N. de Boer, M. Sheard. Media.

19–22—**NECon. (516) 326-6140.** R. Williams College, Bristol RI. Golden, C. S. Gardner. Writers' workshop.

19–22—**Comic Con. www.comic-con.org.** Convention Ctr., San Diego CA. Kim S. Robinson, S. & J. Robinson.

20–22—**Toronto Trek. (416) 410-8266.** Regal Constellation, Toronto ON. Andreas Katsulas. Star Trek.

27–29—**ConEstoga, Box 54037, Tulsa OK 74155. (918) 836-5463.** Sheraton. Joe Haldeman, T. Powers, Weavers.

27–29—**Space:1999 Con, Box 2076, Riverview FL 33568. www.stonehill.org/1999/1999.html.** Radisson, Tampa FL.

27–29—**AnthroCon, Box 270, Devault PA 19432. www.anthrocon.org.** Adams Mark, Phila. PA. For furry fans.

27–29—**Costume College, Box 3052, Santa Fe Spgs. CA 90670. (562) 945-7955.** Airtel, Van Nuys CA. Costumes.

27–29—**Wolf 359, Box 1419, Slough PDO SL2 5WJ, UK. www.wolfevents.co.uk.** Norbeck, Blackpool UK. Trek.

27–29—**ConStruction, 32 Theobald Rd., Cardiff CF5 1LP, UK. members.xoom.com/con_struct.** Con-runner meet.

28–30—**European SMOFfing Event, c/o Grosser, Martinstr. 52, Darmstadt 64285, Germany. bjornts@infotek.no.**

28–29—**ScaperCon, 832 Muddy Branch Rd. #162, Gaithersburg MD 20878. www.bluelady.org.** Cincinnati OH.

28–29—**Star Trek Celebration, 11916 W. 109th #125, Overland Park KS 66210. (913) 327-8735.** Framingham MA.

AUGUST 2001

2–5—**GenCon, Box 1740, Renton WA 98057. (800) 529-3976.** Midwest Express Ctr., Milwaukee WI. Gaming meet.

3–5—**DiversiCon, Box 8036, Lake Street Station, Minneapolis MN 55408. (651) 291-5403.** www.sfminnesota.com.

3–6—**MythCon, 2231 10th, Berkeley CA 94710. www.mythsoc.org.** Kerr Center. High fantasy (Tolkien et al.).

8–12—**qep'a'chorghDich, Box 634, Flourtown PA 19031. www.kli.org.** Brussels, Belgium. Klingon language.

10–12—**ConGlomeration, Box 32095, Louisville KY 40232. (502) 491-6344.** Holiday Inn, Clarksville IN. Vallejo.

10–12—**ConVersion, Box 20098, Calgary AB T2P 4J2. www.con-version.ab.ca.** Metro. Center. Drake, Normand.

10–12—**ConChord, Box 61172, Pasadena CA 91116. www.conchord.org.** Van Nuys CA. SF/fantasy folksinging.

30–Sep. 3—**Millennium PhilCon, Box 310, Huntingdon Valley PA 19006.** Philadelphia PA. WorldCon. $180

AUGUST 2002

29–Sep. 2—**ConJose, Box 61363, Sunnyvale CA 94088. www.conjose@sfsfc.org.** San Jose CA. WorldCon. $140.

AUGUST 2003

28-Sep. 1—**TorCon 3, Box 3, Stn. A, Toronto ON M5W 1A2. www.torcon3.on.ca.** WorldCon. C$170/US$115.

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NEXT ISSUE

SEPTEMBER COVER STORY

New writer **Jim Grimsley**, a playwright and novelist who has won the American Library Association GLBT Award for Literature and the Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and who made his *Asimov's* debut only a few months back, returns with our lead story for September, a complex, lyrical, and compelling novella that takes us deep into an alien environment of startling strangeness and even stranger beauty, in the engrossing story of two siblings, literally caught between two worlds—siblings who must weigh family loyalties against political necessities, with the stakes for everyone as high as they ever get, as a determined young woman dares to venture into unknown and forbidden territory and penetrate deep "Into Greenwood." This one will be talked about at award time next year, so don't miss it!

OTHER TOP-FLIGHT WRITERS

Multiple Hugo and Nebula-winner **Mike Resnick**, who's on the Hugo ballot again this year, returns with a harrowing look, one that may keep you awake nights, what went on when "Old McDonald Had a Farm"; **Robert R. Chase** delivers a thoughtful, thought-provoking, and compassionate study of just what it means to be human (and whether you'd want to be or not!) in the compelling "Seven Times Never"; **Lois Tilton** takes us to a war-torn future for a glimpse into the intricacies, and the surprises, involved in a "Prisoner Exchange"; Hugo-winner **Bruce Sterling** delivers a startling news flash, "Homo Sapiens Declared Extinct"; **Eliot Fintushel** returns with another wild and crazy adventure of Izzy Molson (the balding Transdimensional Cosmic Nexus and part-time motel manager) and his bizarre crew of oddly assorted outcasts, this one revolving around an attempt to get some "Female Action" that turns out to be a lot more effective (and a lot weirder) than even Izzy could have predicted; and **James Alfred Taylor** deals us in (and deals us a hand from the bottom of the deck, at that!) to "The Game of Nine," a game which could turn out to have literally world-shaking consequences for the whole human race.

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column intrepidly investigates "The Case of the Phosphorescent Rabbit"; **James Patrick Kelly's** "On the Net" takes us "Exploring"; and **Peter Heck** brings us "On Books"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our September issue on sale on your newsstand on August 7, 2001, or subscribe today (you can also subscribe online, at our *Asimov's* website, at *http://www.asimovs.com*), and be sure that you miss none of the great stuff we have coming up for you this year! Hey, and although Christmas is past, remember that a gift subscription to *Asimov's* makes a great present any time of the year!

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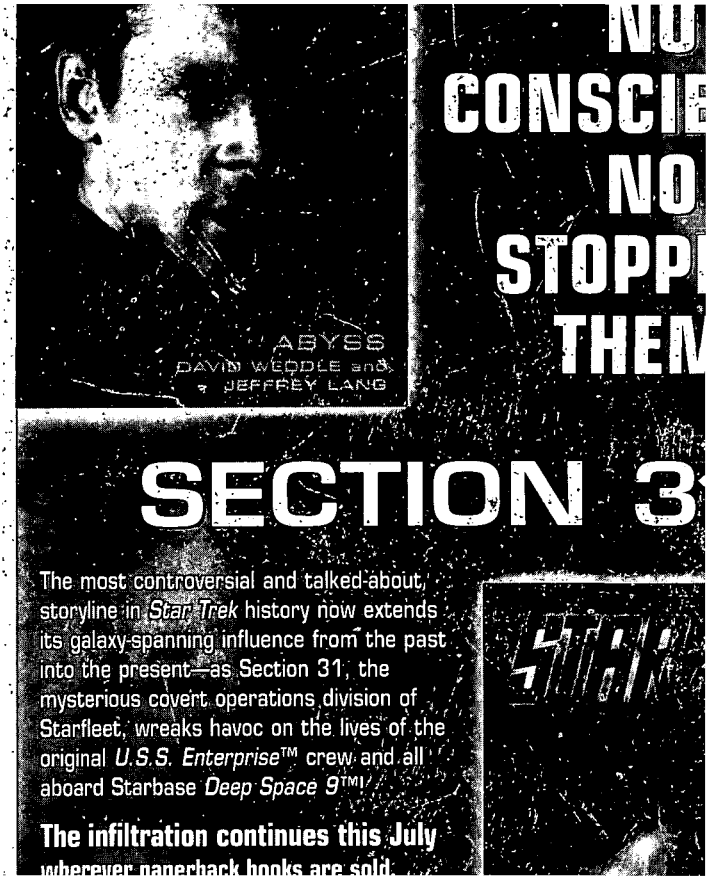
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